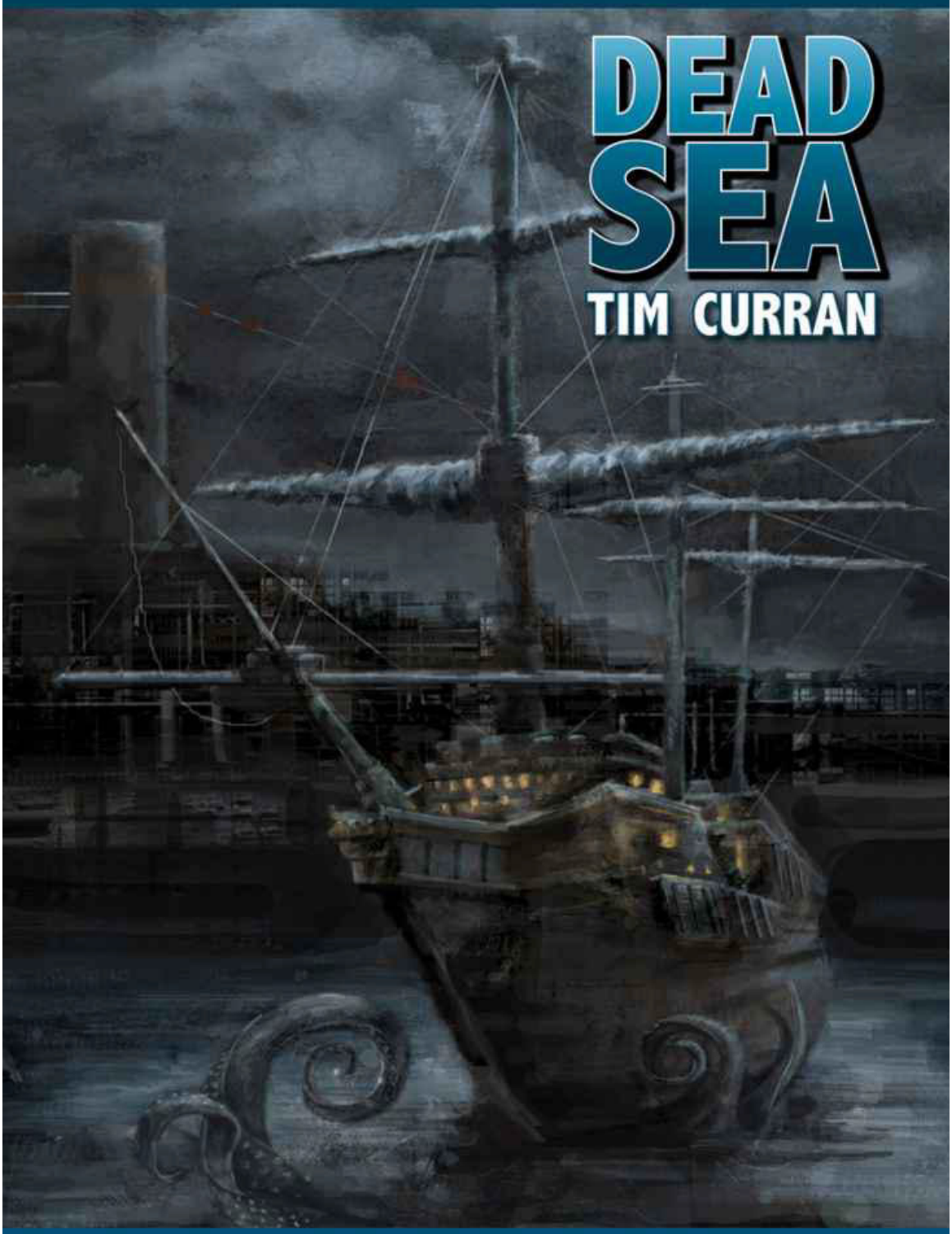
FROM THE AUTHOR OF *HIVE*



DEAD SEA

TIM CURRAN

THERE ARE SOME PLACES FROM WHICH YOU CAN'T RETURN

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DEAD SEA

TIM CURRAN

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Dedicated to the memory of William Hope Hodgson

PROLOGUE

DEVIL OF THE DEEP

1

THREE DAYS, THEN.

Three days adrift in that fetid cage of fog.

Fog that stank like a wind blown from the throat of a corpse.

Just Styles in the little dinghy, alone. Not a man anymore, not really, just something silent and waxen and waiting. Something small and existential, something crushed and discarded, flaking and decaying and dissolving. And, yes, something that was afraid to look into the fog and something that was afraid to listen, because if you listened there were sounds out there. Awful, terrible sounds that-

But Styles was not listening because he was alone and there was nothing in the fog and he had to remember that.

The reality of his shipwreck and exile into that stillborn sea was this: no food, no water, no hope of the same. Just that silent becalmed sea and the mist and his throat swollen and red from screaming, screaming for help and knowing there was none to be had.

Yes, Styles was alone like a man lost on Mars or one that had fallen shrieking into some ebon pit beyond the edges of the universe and he was frightened. Frightened of just about everything. Just him and his mother's silver crucifix at his throat. The both of them, then, stretched out in the dinghy, listening for the sounds of sails or oars or a ship's bell and never hearing them.

Never hearing anything but the fog.

Because if you had nothing to listen to but the papery rustle of your own heartbeat and the scratching of air in your lungs, then you would start listening to the fog like Styles was. And you would realize, soon enough, that the fog was not dead, not really, it was a living, dividing flux of organic material. And if you listened very closely you could hear the blood rushing in its veins and the hum of its nerve endings, a distant rushing sound like respiration. The sound of the fog breathing.

Yes, the fog and always the fog.

A sucking gray mist that stank of rotting seaweed and dead things on beaches, moving and shifting and enclosing. A mildewed, moist shroud that was equal parts corpse gas, teleplasm, and suspended slime. It was thick and coveting, claustrophobic and suffocating.

Styles' first day in it he was amazed by its contours and density. The second day he hated its fullness, its completeness, the way tendrils of it drifted over the dinghy and sought him out. And the third day? The third day it simply scared him. Because he was hearing things in it. The sounds of pelagic nightmares that called it home. The things that were waiting for him to fall overboard, things with yellow eyes and tentacles and sawblade teeth, malignancies and monsters.

And he kept telling himself: *Don't think about that, don't think about any of that business because it's all in your head . . . imagination, that's all.*

And that was sensible, but it didn't hold water because he was alone and all he had for company was his mind and it liked playing tricks on him, nasty tricks. It told him that it honestly didn't matter if he thought about those things, because they were thinking

about *him.* That was insane, but then his mind turned dark and asked if he couldn't feel them out there, those black and demented horrors in the fog, thinking about him and concentrating on him and he had to admit that, yes, God yes, he could. He really could. And he had been feeling something out there from the moment the ship went down and he scrambled shivering and mindless into the dinghy.

But what?

What could possibly be out there?

He didn't know, but he knew that they were out there, unspeakable things melting and oozing into the mist, crawling, grinning abominations with hollow moons for eyes, contaminated things and diseased things with bone pits for minds. Things whose breath stank of graveyards and tombs, things with lamprey-mouths that sought to suck away his air and his blood and his mind. Things which reached out with hooked, fleshless fingers.

Shut your mind down, shut it right down or they will hear you thinking and if they hear you thinking they will find you.

Styles concentrated, reduced his thoughts to a pinprick of light, something weak and insubstantial. His mind pulled into itself and collapsed into the cellar of his psyche and he kept it there, hiding it away from what was in the fog, what was calling his name and whispering obscenities into his ears.

So when he saw the ship, he doubted its reality.

He blinked and demanded that it dissipate, but it refused. It edged in closer, a high brigantine made of mist and ether and ghostly-white ectoplasm. A shade, a shadow, a ghost ship. That was all. Yet . . . he could hear it, hear its deadness. The fore and aft sails hung limp at the mainmast. The high shrouds and rigging drooped and swayed, tendrils of fog climbing them like snakes. The foremast and jibs were creaking like timbers in a haunted house.

Still, Styles did not believe in it.

Even when the men called to him from the foredeck and put a boat down, he did not believe. Not until they rowed over to him and touched him with damp, chilled hands.

And then he screamed.

2

Styles did not remember much of his rescue.

Only that there were hands on him and voices speaking, but he couldn't seem to hear them or understand them when he did. They sounded like a foreign language even though he knew they were not. But he was feverish and his teeth were chattering, his limbs leaden and rubbery and he could hear his voice saying things in a high, whining tone about people in the fog and voices in the fog, eyeless faces and cold, white fingers. The mate told him the name of the ship and the name of the captain, but Styles could make no sense of it.

Awake, then asleep. Awake, then asleep.

That was Styles' life for several days. Sometimes he awoke to find his eyes wide open and staring at shadows in the corners of the cabin, the peculiar way certain angles met and mated, breeding right angles that turned back into themselves and did not exist. Other times he dreamed about things in the fog, immense things that were not man or beast, but grotesque cosmic wraiths like sentient monoliths and pestilent shadows that crawled from one world to the next.

In his moments of clarity, the captain's wife would come and feed him hot beef broth with a wooden spoon. Sometimes she would sing to him and talk in low, muted tones of places far away and unreachable. Styles was certain that more than once he heard the reedy, melancholy tones of a harmonium from somewhere in the ship. The mate looked in on him at times, asking questions about where Styles had come from and the name of his ship and how they had come to be trapped in the fog. The mate liked to talk about the fog and Styles was certain that the fog frightened him, that maybe he, too, thought it was a living thing. Something vast and hungry.

One night, the mate came in with a lit candle in his hand. The light thrown by it flickered and jumped and that was because the mate's hand was shaking so badly. He had a pistol and he put it under the blankets with Styles. "Be careful now, sir, yes be careful. There's only ten of us now . . . the others are gone . . . gone into the fog . . . soon, soon I'll be gone, too. The fog calls out my name, tells me to come to it, tells me how it will be when the end comes . . . how I'll scream and scream . . ."

When Styles woke briefly the next day, he could hear a great activity above deck. The sound of hammering and sawing, footsteps rushing about and frantic voices shouting. Perhaps, perhaps the fog had blown clear and there was a wind. Styles hoped for this but did not believe it.

For in the dead of night, he heard screaming and a great, hollow booming sound. And a hissing, breathing sibilance blowing over the ship. He thought he heard a sound of buzzing, too.

But he was never sure what was real and what was imagination.

All things considered, that was for the best.

3

Styles woke and knew, but did not know.

He fell out of bed, sweating and shaking, his head filled with some crackling static. He was nauseated and weak, but still he made it up to deck and leaned there, against the bulkhead, staring out into that ashen mist.

The ship felt empty.

Abandoned.

Just some immense and empty coffin, creaking and groaning, the fog settling over it like a morbid growth of fungi, dripping off the yards and masts and bowsprit in ribbons.

Styles called out, but his voice echoed off into nothingness.

Alone again.

Alone on a derelict in this haunted sea.

His heart racing and his head spinning, he made it to the main cabin . . . saw immediately that the windows had been boarded-over as if the ship were under attack. But the door was not bolted. Inside, all looked to be in order . . . charts and tools, furniture and clothing. Styles stumbled from the mate's cabin to the captain's cabin and they both looked as if their owners had just stepped out for a pipe.

He made it back to the door and heard sounds coming from the fog . . . voices whispering and muttering and chanting. Yes, not coming from the ship, but off in the fog itself as if a boarding party was nearing. But those voices . . . they were not right. They were flat and hissing and artificial like recordings, scratching and repetitive.

Styles told himself they were not real.

He turned away from them, leaning there in the cabin doorway, knowing that whatever had taken off the crew of the ship was now coming for him. But he would not turn, not look, did not want to look whatever it was in the face. But it was coming, coming on now with a sound of rustling and footsteps and fingernails scraping wood.

Then he did turn, a scream venting itself from his lips.

There was nothing.

There was no one.

Yet, he could hear them whispering like spirits. Hear the sound of their bare feet slapping, the rustle of their clothing. And then out in the fog, there was a cold light. A glowing, thrumming luminosity like some malefic eye watching him through the mist.

Styles threw himself through the door, slammed it shut and bolted it, waiting, waiting, feeling it coming now with a heat and a cold electricity that was hot and acrid and stinking. Outside the door and boarded windows, Styles could see that the decks had gone phosphorescent, that some blinding and burning illumination had consumed the ship now. He heard a high, shrill whining sound and whatever was out there was crawling through him with fire and ice and acid, coming under the door and straight through the walls in a mist of flesh and intent and malevolence.

He screamed once.

Once as it fell over him, moved through him, sorting through his brain with hot needles and knives and gnawing at his thoughts with diamond teeth. He felt his mind boil and loosen, run out his eyes and ears in a cold, smoking sap as the flesh that housed it fell

to ash and his bones rattled dryly in a smoking heap on the deck.

Then there was only silence.

Maybe Styles could not remember the name of the ship, but history would. For she would drift back out of the fog and men would remember her name.

The *Mary Celeste.*

PART ONE

INTO THE MIST

1

ALTHOUGH GEORGE RYAN HAD never been aboard ship before, never anything more radical than a rowboat in an inland lake, he knew there was something he didn't like about the *Mara Corday.* Had he been a sailor, maybe he would've said she didn't feel right. But he wasn't a sailor. He'd never even been in the Navy or the Merchant Service. He'd spent three years in the Army, very landlocked, as an enlisted man in an engineer battalion. The closest he'd ever gotten to the ocean was a six-week stint at Edwards in California when they'd repaved runways. On the weekends, he and a few of the others would drive out to Ventura for a few days of sun, surf, and women. But that was it.

So this was his first time at sea.

And money or no goddamn money, he'd decided it would be his last.

They'd sailed at six in the morning, some twelve hours before, and at first, George had strutted about the decks like an experienced salt. It was nothing, he kept telling the green faces of his co-workers, all of whom had succumbed to seasickness almost immediately. None of them, save for Saks, had ever been out in deep water before. The rolling seas and the violent pitch of the ship hadn't really affected George at that point. Sure, he had trouble walking the spar deck without pitching every which way (much to the amusement of the ship's crew who all seemed to be studies in balance and control), but beyond that, everything was okay. All the worrying and fretting he'd done was for nothing.

He wasn't going to get sick like the others. He was going to take it like Saks. He was a tough guy, too, he'd show 'em all right.

Saks had told them all in Norfolk the night before they'd sailed that they were going to be miserable the first day out. "Well, you listen to me, girlies. The sea'll turn you into babies. You pussies'll be crying for your mommies when we lose land and you start puking your guts out."

George had decided that, as afraid as he was of going out to sea, he wasn't going to get sick. He wasn't going to give Saks the satisfaction. He was going to show that loudmouth macho asshole how wrong he was.

And he had. Oh, yes.

That was . . . until they'd hit the so-called "Graveyard of the Atlantic," off Hatteras, that place of evil seas and wild weather patterns. The very convergence of the warm Gulf Stream current pushing north and the cold currents sweeping down from Arctic waters. Oil and water, they just did not mix very well. Right away, the sea began to turn choppy and angry, the *Mara Corday* responding with what a sailor might have deemed a gentle roll, but to George was an all-out assault on his stomach. So, without further ado, he very promptly hurled his lunch into the head.

After that, of course, he really got sick.

The others were starting to get a little better by then. But George was lying in his bunk feeling like he'd swallowed a bucket of butterflies. He was nauseous, sweating, shivering . . . so dizzy he couldn't even stand up to take a piss. Saks had looked in on him. He couldn't refuse the opportunity, had a big, shiteating grin on his sunburned,

leathery face.

"Not so tough after all, eh, George?"

"Fuck . . . you," George managed and then got the dry heaves again.

Saks was his boss — technically, the foreman of the crew — but he seemed to enjoy it when you mouthed off to him. It made him laugh. Made him feel good, George supposed, knowing which buttons to push to totally piss you off. That's the kind of guy Saks was.

The porter gave George Dramamine and Hyoscine for what ailed him. After a few hours, the worst seemed to be over.

He was able to sit up anyway.

A little while later, gripping the bulkhead of his cabin like a blind man full of whiskey, George actually made it to the porthole and looked out at the sea. It was fairly calm. Yet the ship pitched and yawned like a carnival ride. Maybe it was just him, though.

"Oh, Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?" he asked and sank back into his bunk.

If it wasn't for the fact that he needed the money, that the bank was about to chew his balls off, he would've never signed up for this.

As his eyes closed and he drifted off, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was something about the *Mara Corday* that he just didn't like.

2

"We're making good time," Cushing said, staring out over the water which almost looked black under the gray March sky. "I'm guessing we're right on top of the Hatteras Abyssal Plain on the edge of the Sargasso."

Fabrini rubbed spray from his swarthy face. "What the hell is an abyssal plain, smart guy?"

"Just a submarine plain. Kind of like on land, but this one is about 16,000 feet down," Cushing explained.

Fabrini backed away from the bulwark fencerail. "Shit," he said, maybe afraid he'd get sucked off the deck and down into the churning blackness.

Cushing chuckled. "Yeah, I figure the Bahamas and Cuba are southwest of us right now."

"Cuba?" Menhaus said, lighting a cigarette from the butt of his last. "I'll be gone to hell." Cushing gripped the rail as tight or tighter than the other men. When he was twelve his older brother, as a gag, had thrown him off a bridge into the drink. The drop had been only twelve feet at most. No harm done; he swam to shore unscathed. But ever since then, railings of any type made him nervous.

"Hey! You guys!" Gosling, the first mate, snapped as he passed. "You watch yourselves out there for chrissake. We get a good swell and you'll be knocked ass over teakettle into the drink."

They ignored him like experienced mariners. They'd been through the initiation, they figured, the sickness and all, they knew what they were doing. They were old hands now.

"Don't worry about us," Menhaus laughed.

He always laughed. "Yeah, don't sweat it," Fabrini said.

"Yeah, sure," Gosling said. "And I'll be the one who'll have to fish your asses out before the sharks get ya."

They laughed this off and Gosling went on his way, grumbling.

"You suppose there are sharks out there?" Menhaus wondered.

"No, he's full of shit."

"There's sharks out there," Cushing said. "We're out in the ocean, aren't we? They're probably all over the place."

"Fuck that," Fabrini said. "Fuck that noise."

"I read this book once." Menhaus began.

"You read?" Fabrini snorted. "No shit?"

Menhaus laughed briefly. "No, I read this book about a shipwreck. And this guy was hounded by sharks the whole way."

Nobody wanted to talk about that. None of them had ever been to sea before, save Saks, and the topic that kept coming up was the ship sinking. It was a subject that had been discussed to death the week before they left. And in each man's mind, it was still there, a black sore festering.

"You ever hear about the guy with the little head?" Menhaus asked, grinning once again. "This guy gets shipwrecked and washes up on this island. He finds a bottle and

opens it and out pops this genie. Blonde, beautiful. Just like that broad in that genie show. She says, 'I'll grant you any wish, master'. So the guy says, 'I haven't been with a woman in two months. You're very beautiful. I'd like to make love to you'. The genie shakes her head, 'That is forbidden, master'. Then the guy says, 'Well, how about a little head?'"

Fabrini burst out laughing, slapping Cushing on the back several times. Cushing laughed, too, but gripped the rail a little tighter, afraid maybe that Fabrini's good cheer was going to knock him over.

A gust of salty wind tore into them, making their jackets flap and rustle like flags on a high pole. Menhaus and Fabrini hugged themselves against the chill, but Cushing preferred to hang on. Tight. He was a big reader. He'd read books on just about everything. When he was younger, he'd been fascinated by the sea. He'd devoured books on marine life, naval battles, even the folklore of the sea. But, he realized right then, he'd never read anything about surviving a shipwreck. The idea of that bothered him.

"How about the one about that guy's brother?" Menhaus went on, now that he had a captive audience. "He gets thrown off the same boat, but washes up on a different island. He finds the bottle, rubs it, out pops this genie. She gives him the same shit about granting his wishes. So he says, 'I'd like my cock to be so long it drags on the ground'. So the genie makes his legs two inches long."

They all laughed again and another gust came up. Perfectly punctuating the punch line this time. It occurred to Cushing that it was like the sea was laughing along with them . . . or at them. The wind hammered out of the north, yanking at their coats, making the legs of their pants flutter. The tarps on the lifeboats up on the boat deck snapped and strained at their moorings.

Fabrini said, "Let's go in. Let the swabbies deal with this."

The wind cranked up again, this time tearing the baseball cap from Fabrini's head and sending it out over the water.

"Shit," he said. "My lucky hat."

Menhaus in tow, they left, leaving Cushing alone out by the rail. Cushing wasn't even aware that they were gone. He watched Fabrini's cap (it said CAT above the brim) get tossed about by the conflicting, angry winds. It came to rest on a wave, was inundated by the crest of another. Still it floated, drenched, bobbing, carried by ripples of foam. Something silvery came out of the deep and nudged it.

But by then, it was out of range.

3

George Ryan was feeling more himself by the time darkness fell over the ocean. There was no twilight. No moment where day and night stood balanced in some beautiful neutrality. One moment the dying arcs of the sun were glinting off the spray-beaded pane of the porthole, the shadows growing long like teeth, and the next, it was dark. More so, black. So black he couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. The only light there was spilled in from the porthole, from the dimly-lit decks. Beyond the railing, it was utter blackness. Like a mineshaft at midnight.

Darkness.

Complete.

Unrelenting.

George rubbed his eyes and lit a cigarette. According to Morse, the captain, and good old Saks, they would be docking in Cayenne, French Guiana late the next evening. Saks said they could spend the night out on the town. But come first light, they had a job to do and they were damned well going to do it. George thought he'd probably pass on a night of drink and debauchery and just rest up in his hotel room on dry land. The other could wait until the job was done. He started thinking that two days at sea wasn't bad. Not when you thought of the days when people spent months, years even, on a voyage.

"I could've stayed home," he said under his breath.

And part of him still wished that he had.

But that part of him didn't worry about creditors. It didn't have the banks biting at its ass. It didn't have two ex-wives salivating for alimony. It didn't have a son to raise. It didn't have a big, fat, juicy mortgage to worry about. It didn't have monstrous dental bills from the kid's braces. And it surely didn't have to wade hip-deep through medical bills from the wife's back surgery. No, that part of him didn't give a shit in a high wind about any of that.

All it had was paranoia.

All it had was that tinny, metallic voice that kept echoing in George's skull about how all of this was one colossal fuck-up. How this was one big mistake and he should've listened and now it was just too goddamn late, buddy.

George took drags off his cigarette, licking his dry lips.

Saks had organized the job. He'd recruited the crew which included George. The set-up was simple: west of someplace called Kaw just off the Kounana River, there was a diamond mine on the Guiana Shield that had been hacked from the jungle. It was owned in partnership by a French mining company and Franklin Fisk. The same Fisk of Fisk Technologies, the electronics magnate out of Miami, who'd made a killing with lithium batteries. The problem was this mining camp had no airstrip. Supplies had to be brought in by truck which took several days and the product had to go out the same way. During the rainy season, many of the roads were washed out, and in some cases, washed completely away. It cost money to keep rebuilding them not to mention the money lost while trucks idled away for days waiting for a decent, passable road. So Fisk wanted an airstrip. It would save the collective millions every year. Fly in what you need, fly out the product. What took trucks days to manage on hazardous jungle roads, planes did in a few

hours.

It made sense.

Saks was a construction jobber out of Miami. He was the lowest bidder. He got the job, set everything up. Fisk's people would have flatbed trailers waiting for them in Cayenne to off-load the heavy equipment onto. They would also have all the labor needed and all the materials waiting at the camp. Saks had already been there a few times and surveyed it all out. When the crew arrived, they would cut a strip into the jungle and each get fifteen grand a piece. Saks, of course, got a bigger cut. They all got paid well for a month's work and Saks said they could wrap it up in three weeks tops. The local labor, mostly Maroons and Amerindians, didn't fare so well — they worked for practically pennies a day.

George had already spent his money.

The fifteen grand — cash, no taxes — would pay off the dentist and take a good bite out of the medical bills. Lisa hadn't wanted him to go. She didn't like the idea of him cruising over the open sea in a ship loaded with big dozers and barrels of diesel fuel. But the money had changed her mind. Jacob, his boy, thought it was great. It was like an adventure to him. He wanted to come along. And wasn't that just like a boy? Bring me something home, dad, he'd told George. You know, like a big snake or a shrunken head.

"Be careful of those big crocodiles," Lisa had said before he left. "I saw it on TV. They eat people down there."

Yeah, George thought, and so do the ones in the New York sewers.

George had never been in a real jungle before. He'd worked bridges and cut roads in the Louisiana bayou and Florida everglades. But, according to Saks, those places were about as tropical as Boise compared to the real, primeval green hell of French Guiana. This was a land of spiders bigger than your hand, poisonous insects, toxic plants, and venomous snakes. A lush, dripping, steaming green world where cholera and dengue fever, malaria and typhoid went unchecked. You had to be careful, Saks told them, because in the jungle things happen. Bot flies would lay their eggs in any open cut. Huge ticks would suck your blood. Parasitic worms would get under your skin. And biting sand flies would infect you with tropical ulcers that would eat holes right through you . . . yeah, it was all part of the allure and mystery of central French Guiana.

George finished his cigarette, slapped on his boots and slicker and went out onto deck. The wind had died down. And even though the ship was listing, it wasn't as bad as earlier. He was almost starting to get used to its motion. The only thing that bothered him was the dark. It was black out there. Living in towns and cities, you tended to forget just what night really was after a time. That night meant *night.* It meant blackness, it meant absence of light, it meant forget about your eyes because they weren't worth a damn out on a starless, moonless night on the ocean.

Yeah, George felt easier with the roll of the ship, but he didn't dare go by the railing for fear of the pit of watery blackness beyond. It felt oddly and eerily to him like some huge mass grave that could never be filled.

And as he moved along the cabins, it fell over him again: the bad feeling. The gnawing, unpleasant sense that all was not right with this ship. Just a feeling. Yet, it gripped him like ice.

It's just the dark, he told himself, the sea. That's all.

And maybe that's all it was, but he didn't like it any better.

The ship bothered him.

He couldn't quite put a finger on why, but it did. Morse, the captain, seemed able. As did the mates and crew. Some of them were drinkers, he knew, smelling of whiskey and gin. But not drunks. Not so far as he saw. Just men who had to work in the elements and needed a nip or two to keep them warm. Nothing wrong with that.

Maybe it was the cargo.

The way it was stowed. The decks were obstructed, crowded really, with the heavy equipment they needed to clear a strip in the jungle. Two big Cat dozers. A pair of shiny yellow John Deere graders. Scrapers. Front-end loaders. A roller. Anywhere you went on deck you had to weave your way amongst them. Huge crates containing iron concrete forms, picks and shovels, form spikes, strike boards. Spare parts for the machinery.

Just too much clutter, too much confusion.

Then, George supposed, that was probably the way things were done. Every available space on a cargo freighter meant money and you had to pack it in any way you could. Just like in the back of a truck.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if it really was the ship that was bothering him. Maybe it was something else. Something waiting out there . . . on the sea or in the jungle. Regardless, it was down deep in his belly like tacks.

George went aft to join the others. The night seemed even darker.

4

The *Mara Corday* was a 720-foot container ship driven by a single-screw, 32,000 horsepower steam turbine. She had a 38,700 ton displacement and could do twenty-two knots fully trimmed. She had seven holds and a special dangerous cargo area in the fore hold. Though her keel was laid back in the early 1950s, she had been extensively retrofitted with advanced computer and navigational systems and could be crewed by twenty-one men.

George Ryan was mistaken in thinking there was something wrong with the ship. She held fine in heavy seas and whispered over calm ones. Not a sailor on board felt what he was feeling. They could feel the *Mara Corday* under them and she was solid, tight. If there was trouble ahead, then it wouldn't be from the ship.

By seven that night, the wind picked-up to thirty knots and the ship moved with an uneasy, yawing leeward roll that was not surprising considering her load. The decks were full and the holds below packed tight with everything from drums of ready-mix concrete to bins of asphalt for Saks and his crew, rebuilt diesel engines and mining drills and pallets of steel girders, assorted other stores needed in Cayenne.

The *Mara Corday* held her own and could have held it through a hurricane. She was high and proud and tireless, a real workhorse of the seas. She could have plied her trade for decades to come and probably would, unless something interfered with her.

And right then, something was about to.

5

They ate their supper that night in shifts.

First, the captain, his mates, and the chief engineer. Then the ship's crew down in the messroom in groups of four. Finally, Saks and his men. They chose to be last to give their stomachs a little more time to orient themselves to shipboard life. The fare was good. A thick beef stew with biscuits and French bread. Plenty of fruit. Ham sandwiches with the meat cut like slabs. Apple pie and ice cream for dessert. Life at sea didn't agree with any of Saks's men, but the eats were right up their alley.

"Hey, Fabrini," Menhaus said through a mouth of bread, "how do you castrate a hillbilly?"

"Kick his sister in the jaw."

There were a few laughs around the table at that, but not many. In the past two weeks since Saks had organized his crew, the men had spent much time together and Menhaus and Fabrini wore on the nerves after awhile.

"Where's the hardtack and gruel?" George said as he sat down and poured himself a glass of water.

Saks wiped gravy off his lips. "Well, I'll be goddamned," he said. "Isn't that George Ryan? The tough Irish sonofabitch who doesn't get seasick like the rest of you babies?"

"Fuck you," George said.

All the others — Saks, Fabrini, Menhaus, Cushing, Soltz, and Cook — were digging right in. Their stomachs had adjusted and they found that ship life made them ravenous. The wind, the weather, the sea. It made men hungry. George hadn't been too sure he'd be able to eat a bite on his way over . . . but now, seeing all that food. He dug in.

"Hey, shit-fer-brains," Saks snapped at Cook, "dish our George up some stew, will ya? He's the last of the hard men."

Fabrini giggled. "Yeah, he's about as hard as Soltz's cock."

Menhaus thought that was hilarious. His belly jiggled and he slapped Soltz on the shoulder. Soltz spewed out a carrot. "Please," he said, "I'm trying to eat here."

Soltz was something of a quandary to the other men. Balding and bespectacled, he was pale as snow and soft as baby fat. Not the sort of guy you pictured on a scraper or a roller. His belly was so large it looked like he'd swallowed a beach ball. But it wasn't hard fat like Saks had at his belt or girth like Menhaus wore proudly, it was soft fat. With his brooding hangdog-face and allergies and full pink lips (which he applied Chapstik to habitually), he looked very much like the much-put upon, last-one-to-be-picked-for-every-game sort of kid he had once been.

He just didn't fit in.

"Yeah, leave mama's boy alone over there," Fabrini said.

"Saks? Do I have to put up with this?" Soltz wanted to know.

"Yeah, big bad men like us," Menhaus chided.

"That's enough," Saks said. "Leave him be, you faggots."

George felt sorry for the man. With a crew like this you had to be able to speak up

for yourself, to trade insult for insult without getting your feathers ruffled. “Just tell ‘em to kiss your ass, Soltz,” he said.

Cook slid him a plate of stew. He was an emaciated guy with fine features and almost downy blond hair. He rarely spoke and when he did, most of the others with their blue collar sensibilities did not understand what he was talking about. But none of it bothered Cook, he took his share of shit and seemed to be perpetually amused by the high school mentality of the others. He never smiled nor frowned. He just accepted and went on.

“Eat up, tough guy,” Saks said.

Fabrini grinned. “If you’re still hungry, I got something for you to eat.”

“I’d starve on that,” George said and everybody laughed. Even a slight smile crossed Cook’s dour lips.

Saks finished up, pushed his plate away and burped. “There’s a kiss for you, Fabrini.” He lit up a cigar. “You boys eat good, rest up. When we hit the jungle you’ll be working sunup to sundown or I’ll throw your asses to the crocs.”

A few more insults passed in Saks’s direction. He laughed along with the rest of them. Sometimes the others never knew what to make of him. They weren’t sure if he was all hot air or the real thing. He was a short stocky guy built like a slab of cement. His arms bulged with muscles and tattoos, his chest was a drum. His face was perpetually sunburned and leathery, his powder blue eyes bulging like egg yolks. A year shy of fifty-five, he kept his thinning hair and bristle brush mustache dyed jet black. He’d pulled two tours with the Navy Seabees in Vietnam, clearing beaches and laying down airstrips under heavy fire. He started up his own contracting firm not long after. He’d worked all over Central and South America doing everything from chopping roads through the bush to rigging camps and laying railheads.

George decided Saks had asshole written all over him. He suspected that the moment he met the man and knew it for sure when they’d all gone out drinking two days before they sailed and Saks had done nothing but brag about his exploits and intimidate the others. The final straw had been when he started doing one-armed push-ups on the barroom floor.

Gradually, the talk turned away from general insults and the sexual habits of the crew’s mothers and onto French Guiana in general. Saks had a few things to say on the subject. He told them about the notorious penal colonies the French government had run there, the most celebrated being Devil’s Island. How escaped prisoners would swim from there, most either drowning or getting devoured by sharks. The few survivors that made shore would have to hack their way through hundreds of miles of primordial jungle to the Maroni River, which separated French Guiana from Dutch Guiana, now Surinam. And crossing that dirty, brown river was no easy bit.

“Infested with piranhas,” Saks said. “Dutch soldiers stationed on the river would watch convicts get boiled down to skeletons right before their eyes.”

“Remind me to stay dry,” George murmured.

“You ever been out where we’re going?” Menhaus asked him.

Saks pulled off his cigar, studied the burning end. “Once. Ten years ago. We laid a bridge over the Mara River. That’s west of where we’re going.”

“How was it?” Fabrini asked.

“It was hell, that’s what it was. We were deep in the jungle. Swamps everywhere. Mosquitoes and flies laid on you like blankets. They laughed at the bug juice we’d brought along. After awhile, we were so bitten up we started spreading mud on our faces and arms like the local boys we’d hired. But that didn’t keep the leeches off you or the goddamn snakes.”

“Snakes?” Soltz gasped. “I don’t like snakes.”

“He don’t like long, hanging things,” Fabrini said. “Reminds him of what he don’t have.”

“I’m more sensitive to certain things than you are,” Soltz explained, to which Fabrini rolled his eyes.

Saks ignored them. “Third day out we lost a kid to snakebite. He was a local. He was cutting some wood in the jungle for struts. A bushmaster got him. A big bastard. Ten feet, maybe. Came out of a hole in the mud, sank its fangs in the kid’s ankle. We shot him up with antivenin. Didn’t matter. He was dead twenty minutes later.”

“Fuck this,” Fabrini said. “You didn’t say nothing about shit like that.”

The others looked as pale as Soltz, who had now gone one shade darker than fresh cream.

“You can always swim back,” George told Fabrini.

“There were water snakes on the river. Couple of guys got bit by them. Made ‘em sick, but it passed. We were real careful after the kid died. At least we thought so until Tommy Johansen bought it,” Saks said slowly and for the first time there seemed to be something akin to real emotion on his face.

“What happened?” Menhaus inquired. “Another snake?”

“Crocodile. I’ll never forget it.” Saks exhaled a cloud of smoke. The only sounds were the wind outside, the waves crashing into the bow, and the hum of the turbines below. “I’ve seen all kinds of shit in my life. We had a pet snake in ‘Nam. A fifteen-foot python. Gentle as a baby. Used to keep the rats out of camp. Then it helped itself to some hooker’s baby she’d left alone so she could suck some dick. I seen a VC get taken down by a tiger over there. We just watched that sucker get shredded and we cheered when it dragged the little zipperhead off into the jungle. That tiger was on our side. I saw a guy get slashed by a Jaguar in Paraguay. It blinded him. I saw a guy’s pet pit bull fall into the Amazon and get turned into hamburger by piranhas. I even once saw some Mex get stung to death by bees in Bolivia. But I hadn’t seen nothing until Tommy Johansen bought it.

“Tommy and me were close. We built docks in Rio and Salvador for years. We were tight. One day, on that goddamn bridge job, one of the locals let a float drift away downriver. Tommy went nuts. Made the guy wade down there after it, Tommy leading him by the ear. I saw what happened next. Croc must’ve been a twenty-footer, maybe twenty-five. Bigger around than a goddamn refrigerator. Vicious bastard. Teeth like railroad spikes. It came up out of the water, that filthy shit-brown water, out of the weeds . . .” Saks had to stop here a moment, his voice was beginning to waver. His eyes were moist. He breathed in and out very slowly. “Rotten fucking lizard grabbed Tommy around the waist and we all saw it. We heard his bones shatter like twigs. Blood everywhere. Tommy was screaming and screaming. The locals were screaming. I think I was screaming, too.” He licked his lips. “Tommy was a big boy. Six-foot-five, three hundred pounds. All muscle. But to that fucking croc he was a ragdoll. He shook Tommy back and

forth until there was no fight left in him. By the time we got down there, the croc had dragged Tommy downriver. I saw it drag him under. I saw one of Tommy's arms flapping before it went under like he was saying goodbye."

After a moment of silence, George said, "Did you find him?"

"No. Never found so much as his hat. The croc never came back."

"I didn't come down here to be eaten," Menhaus pouted.

"Me either," Fabrini said. "Fuck that."

"A caiman," Cushing said. "It was probably a caiman. A big one. A Black Caiman."

"It doesn't bring him back knowing it's name," Cook said.

Everyone looked up. It was the first time they'd heard him speak other than in response to a direct question. The logic of what he said shut everyone up.

"Yeah, caiman, all right. That's what it was," Saks finally said. "Where we're going, maybe it won't be that bad. Won't be any crocs or fucking caimans around. Just watch for snakes. They'll be spraying for bugs. You'll be safe enough. Just be careful."

"That's why you're telling us this stuff, isn't it, Saks?" Cushing said. "So we'll be careful."

"Yes. The jungle is primitive, girls. Remember that. You're not the boss there. It's the boss. You'd better have respect for it, cause it sure as hell will have no respect for you."

"I think I'm going to be sick," Soltz said, pushing away from the table and bolting out the door. He left it wide open. The wind hammered it against the bulkhead.

The first mate, Gosling, appeared moments later. "You men secure these hatches when you come and go or I'll throw you to the fucking fish."

He slammed the hatch and disappeared.

Menhaus and Fabrini left next, both were bitching about the job, about life, about nature in general. Cook slipped out without a word. Only Cushing, George, and Saks were left.

"We should get some sleep," Cushing suggested.

"Yeah," George said, leaving his plate half-full. His appetite was gone again. He felt sick. "You coming, Saks?"

"No. I think I'll stay and think about my friend awhile."

Cushing and George waited, not knowing what to say.

Saks grimaced. "Well, what do you want? Get the fuck out of my sight."

They left him alone.

6

Gosling, the first mate, licked his sandpaper lips and lit his pipe.

Something wasn't right.

He stood outside the pilothouse door, staring across the decks. They were lit and he could see everything. Nothing looked amiss . . . yet, *yet* something was not kosher. He could feel it deep down inside. Call it instinct, call it intuition, call it whatever you wanted, but something was really wrong here. He just couldn't put a finger on what it was. He could feel the steady throb of the engines through the deck plates beneath his feet. It was not mechanical. After years spent on freighters, he could actually sense when there was a mechanical failure somewhere just as a man can sense something not quite right with his own body. It was like a sixth sense you developed when you knew the sea and you knew your vessel and how she felt and responded and reacted to every wake and swell.

No, the ship was fine.

The crew was fine.

What then?

He stood there, smoking, sending feelers out in every direction.

It didn't make any sense. Yet, he'd been sailing long enough to know he could trust his instincts. But this seemed almost beyond experience, beyond comprehension, something intangible and unknown . . . an almost physical menace.

There was trouble.

There was danger . . . but where? *How?*

Gosling's skin had gone clammy and his hands were trembling. It was bad and he had no explanation. He threaded his way amongst the cargo lashed to the spar deck and went to the railing. The sea was calm. Like glass. Like the water in some kid's little backyard swimming pool. That wasn't right. He'd been sailing the Atlantic for years and he'd never seen the waters so inexplicably calm. Especially this far out in open water. And March was a notoriously bad time in this part of the ocean. Storms came and went like notions. But never, never, was the sea so positively . . . *dead.*

Okay, he thought, okay. Let's see what's happening here.

He walked into the pilothouse, secured the hatch, stood there with his hands on his hips.

"How goes it?" Gosling said.

Iverson, the wheelsman, was seated at the chart table, banks of computer screens glowing before him. A copy of *Hustler* was balanced on his knee. He shrugged. "Good to go, Mr. Gosling. Pretty quiet out there tonight."

Gosling nodded, sighed, just couldn't get that certainty out of his system that something was terribly wrong or about to go south on them. It was on him, in him, an almost physical sense of expectation, of dread.

The pilothouse was rectangular in shape, looked much like an air traffic control tower from the interior, windows to all sides. It was a handsome room, decked out in oak and brass, all original construction from the '50s. The original ship's wheel was still in place, next to the binnacle and gyrocompass repeater which was connected to the gyro

down in dunnage. Of course, nobody manned the wheel anymore. The *Mara Corday* was navigated exclusively by DGPS, Digital Global Positioning System, which was monitored by computer and fed to autopilot. To get to point B from point A, it was only a matter of entering preset coordinates. Gosling checked the screens, was only marginally reassured. Across the front of the pilothouse were panels of controls and instrumentation — radar units, bow thruster controls, RDF and Navtex receivers.

"You get the weather?"

"Yeah, about twenty minutes ago. NWS calls for clear skies through tomorrow night."

Gosling checked the satellite imagery on one of the computer screens where the ship was fed continuous atmospheric info. He read through the forecast on the weather fax receiver. Yeah, like Iverson said, there was nothing of concern there. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Still, Gosling wasn't satisfied. The ship had two Kelvin radar units and Inmarsat B and C Satnav, Electronic Chart System. Everything checked. They were on course. What the hell was it then? The more he couldn't find the glitch here, the ghost in the machine, the more it ate at him.

"Calm tonight, eh?" Iverson said, flipping through pages.

Calm before the storm, Gosling thought morosely.

Iverson set his magazine down. Looked nervous and picked it up again. "You ever seen a calm like this, Mister Gosling?"

Gosling ignored him. He checked the communication systems. The ship had standard radiotelephone, VHF, SSB, MF/HF stations. It had voice, data, fax, and telex connectivity via Inmarsat Satcom. Gosling scanned all the channels. Everything. Commercial, marine, aviation, even the distress frequencies. There was nothing but static and a shrill white noise he'd never heard before.

"You had activity before?" he said.

Iverson nodded. "Shit, yeah. I had chatter all over the place."

"Nothing now."

"Gotta be."

Iverson scanned the channels himself. He checked the components over. Everything looked good. "I don't get it."

But Gosling was beginning to. Because whatever was coming, he figured, it was coming now, swooping down on them out of the night. It was crazy thinking, still it persisted. His guts were roiled like stormy waters, his throat tight, his scalp itchy.

"You all right, Mister Gosling?"

Gosling looked at him hard and for the first time in his life, he couldn't think of a single thing to say. Nothing that would make sense anyway.

Satnav was still operational. Radar was blank . . . oddly blank, not so much as a cloud out there. They were still online, operational. But audio and radar were down or seemed to be . . . now why was that?

Lights out, Gosling found himself thinking. *The lights are being turned out on us one at a time. Lights out.*

He was imagining a tall building at night, all the windows lit . . . then, one by one, the lights going out. *Lights Out.* That was also the name of an old spooky radio show.

And what did the announcer say at the beginning while that distant bell was gonging? *It . . . is . . . later . . . than . . . you . . . think . . .*

Iverson kept scanning channels. “Something funny here,” he said.

And, yeah, it was funny, all right. Gosling was thinking it was funny, too. Because something was building here, something was happening incrementally and he didn’t honestly know what it was. Only that he could *feel* it gathering momentum. Like some negative electrical charge in the air gaining impetus.

There was a shrill beeping.

Iverson said, “GPS says we’re off-line . . . interference or something . . .”

There was a hint of panic to his voice and Gosling knew it wasn’t just his imagination now: Iverson was feeling it, too. Maybe one system would go to hell, but all of them? One after the other?

Together, they walked over to the binnacle. The magnetic compass was spinning around in circles. The gyrocompass was rolling, trying to find a bearing.

“Jesus,” Iverson said.

7

"You see?" Fabrini said when Menhaus and he were in their cabin with Cook snoring away. "I knew there was a catch to this shit. I just fucking knew it. Didn't I tell you that night that there had to be a catch?"

Menhaus nodded. With sleepy eyes, he studied the clouds of smoke he was exhaling. "You did indeed. You surely did."

"And I was right, goddammit. Fifteen-thousand for what? Three weeks' work? Yeah, that's what he said. He left out the crap about poisonous snakes and leeches and man-eating alligators."

"Crocodiles. Caimans. Cushing said-"

"Who gives a damn what you call 'em. They eat your ass all the same."

Menhaus chewed his lower lip, stroked his mustache. "Saks said it wouldn't be like that where we're going."

"I don't care what he said."

"But we're not working on a bridge. We're not even by water, he said. Not too close, anyway."

Fabrini's dark skin went red. "Listen to yourself, would ya? For chrissake, you dumb shit, he'll say anything. Didn't you notice how he didn't mention any of this shit until we were in the middle of the Bumfuck Sea? If he'd said it before we sailed, nobody in their right mind would've went."

"I guess you're right."

"Damn straight I'm right" He pulled off his shoes and threw them against the bulkhead. A few flakes of gray paint chipped free. "Sometimes, man, I wish I was still in stir"

Menhaus said nothing. He was thinking about Talia, his wife. She'd never bore him any children. Had a vicious tongue and an ass the size of a bus. He was thinking about that ass, thinking how he'd miss it if anything went wrong. Right now he wanted more than anything to hear her call him a lazy good-for-nothing slob. The idea of it made him want to cry.

"Starting right now, buddy," Fabrini said, "you and me watch each other's backs. Fuck the rest of 'em. We're coming out of this alive. And when we get back to New Orleans, we're going to get us a couple hookers and get drunk for three pissing days. We'll get some nice young ones, hear? Tight asses."

Fabrini turned the light off and stared into the darkness.

Menhaus was thinking he didn't give a damn about tight asses. He wanted Talia's ass and her mouth and all the shit combined which made a life. It was all he saw now. All he wanted to see.

They laid there silently for a time, listening to Cook snore.

Fabrini got back up, went to the porthole. He couldn't see a thing out there. He paced back and forth, then sat back down again. "Dammit," he said.

"What's eating you?" Menhaus asked him.

Fabrini was breathing hard in the darkness. "I don't know . . . I gotta funny feeling or something. I got the chills here."

Menhaus did, too. “Me, too. I feel like I got the willies something awful,” he admitted.

And whatever it was, it was growing, filling the air, inundating the ship and drowning the men one by one.

After a time, Menhaus nervously said, “Hey, Fabrini? You hear the one about the gay rabbi who wanted a sex change?”

8

In the pilothouse, Iverson had forgotten about his *Hustler*. Forgotten about tits and ass and everything in-between. He'd been feeling groggy when Gosling came in, knowing he was pulling the dogwatch and thinking how far away morning was, sucking down a lot of coffee.

But now he was wide awake and it had nothing to do with caffeine.

Radio was out. Satnav and Satcom off-line. Compass fucked-up. Iverson was a modern sailor. He trusted his instruments, had complete faith in them. And when they were out, it was back to celestial observation and dead reckoning, paper charts and sextants. Back to the jungle. Just like in the old days when a ship at sea might as well have been on another planet. Alone, completely alone.

Iverson sipped his coffee and swallowed.

What he was watching was the radar. The screen had been empty for the past hour, but now it had locked onto something. Something big, something spreading out for miles and miles it seemed. Something like a bank of fog that was like no bank of fog Iverson had ever seen. Even the radar's computer was having trouble telling exactly what it was. It was not solid, certainly, it was a gaseous envelope like a patch of mist . . . yet much denser. And the *Mara Corday* was steaming right into it.

Twice now, Iverson had made to call up the old man, but had hesitated. What could he say? A bank of fog? *Jesus H. Christ, Iverson, you called me up here to look at a bank of fog?* No, he couldn't call the captain in on this. Besides, Gosling had the deck and you didn't want to be going over his head. Gosling wasn't the sort you wanted to piss off. Gosling saw the fog coming. He'd seen it first and it was he who told Iverson that, the way it was expanding and the rate it was moving at — an unprecedented sixty-knots, if radar was reading it right — there was no way they could get around it. Whatever it was, it had them. Had them tight, by Jesus.

"Besides, for chrissake," Gosling had said. "What the hell am I going to tell the skipper? We steamed twenty miles off course to avoid some fucking mist?"

Sure, that made sense.

But it didn't make Iverson feel any better. Because it was almost on them now and he could see it filling the screen, opening up to swallow them like the jaws of some immense beast.

Iverson began to pray under his breath.

9

George Ryan and Cushing were forward, up near the bow watching the ship cut into the flat, glassy waters.

"This isn't bad at all," George said. "I could handle sailing in seas like this."

Cushing smiled. "Don't get your hopes up. It won't last. A freak calm, that's all."

George suddenly narrowed his eyes and peered into the night. "Check it out," he said.

"You see that?"

It was like somebody had strung up a rolling white tarp in the distance. It was getting larger by the second, blotting out everything, eating the darkness and the sea foot by foot.

"Fogbank," Cushing said, unsure.

George had never seen anything like it. It was a huge, undulating blanket of yellow-white mist, sparkling and luminous. It took his breath away. Within a minute or so, you could see nothing else. It was like the heavens, clouds and all, had fallen to earth and consumed everything in their path.

"Quite a sight, eh?"

George and Cushing turned. Gosling was standing there, arms folded, his pipe dangling from his lips. He looked strange, tense maybe.

"You ever seen a fogbank like that?" George said.

"Sure, plenty of times. You get 'em out here," he said.

For some uncanny reason, George had the odd feeling that he was being lied to.

"Are you going to steer around it?" Cushing asked.

"What do you think?"

And they knew what he meant. It was everywhere, closing in from what seemed every direction. There was no avoiding it unless they were to turn back, but at the speed it was making, they'd never outrun it.

"Do they always glow like that?" George said. "Those fogbanks?"

Gosling smiled thinly. "Sure." He tapped out his pipe on the railing.

"It's going to be pea soup here in about twenty minutes, boys, you better get below."

They left and Gosling stood there, feeling a strange compulsion to wait for it, to meet the mist dead on.

Trembling, he waited.

10

George couldn't sleep.

He laid there, feeling the subtle thrum of the ship beneath him. It was nothing he really cared for, but after awhile your body seemed to adjust to anything. The mind was the real problem. A certain paranoia had settled into him now. Before, it had been merely a bad feeling. Like a sense of apprehension a person got before going to the dentist or getting their taxes done. Normal, really.

But this paranoia, it was different.

He knew it wasn't from Saks's tales of jungle predators. Things like that were pretty much to be expected in the bush.

This was something else.

An almost black, unrelenting dread that worried at his nerves like a cat at a mouse. It would not leave him alone. Every time he closed his eyes, they snapped back open and he started, gasping awake like he was being smothered. A brooding sense of foreboding.

An almost inescapable knowledge that the shit was about to hit.

Heavy weather ahead.

So George laid there, expecting the worse, wondering what form it would take and when. Thinking maybe he was going crazy, but knowing, somehow, that would be the least of his problems. They would be into that fog anytime now and maybe they already were. Try as he might, he couldn't get the idea out of his head that Gosling had been nervous about that fogbank rolling at them. George didn't know much about fog and particularly fog at sea . . . but there was something unusual about this one. And he didn't believe for a moment that fog glowed like that.

It just wasn't natural.

What had Lisa said at the docks?

Be careful of those big crocodiles, George. And be careful out on that sea . . . funny things happen at sea. My dad was a sailor and he always said that. Funny things happen at sea

George was shivering.

Jesus, how prophetic those words were becoming.

11

Cushing was up later than the others.

Long after Fabrini and Menhaus shook their unease and nodded off and George finally gave in to sleep and Saks and Soltz called it a night, he was still awake. Awake and restless.

He wasn't like the others, not really. And this wasn't because he held some elitist notion that since he was educated and they weren't, he was a better man. For he wasn't better, just different. He wasn't a grader operator or a dozer jockey like the others. He came under the guise of being an office manager, a clerk, the guy who was to be the go-between for Saks's crew and the mine people. It was his job to see that the crew got everything they wanted and when they wanted it.

And this was true.

Within limits.

He was the only one of the crew who knew Franklin Fisk personally. Saks had dealt with him and his people on several other projects in South America. But that was strictly a business relationship. Cushing, on the other hand, knew Fisk very well, had worked for him for some ten years now. He had been instrumental in implementing the multimillion dollar marketing strategy of Fisk's overseas interests. Fisk, it so happened, was also married to Cushing's sister. No one on the crew knew this. No one would ever know it.

No one would ever know the truth.

And the truth was that Cushing was a spy. That he had been hand-picked by Fisk himself to keep an eye on Saks. Saks was rumored to be a nasty one. Yes, he got the job done, always brought the projects in under budget and within schedule. But rumors had it he was an alcoholic. That he spent his days and nights drinking in his tent while his men labored. That he was physically abusive of his crew. That he often treated local workers like slave labor. On his last project, Saks had been accused of raping a village girl. He had also been accused of causing the deaths of three local men in a blasting accident. The story went that Saks had set the charges to clear a shelf of rock that was obstructing the road there were laying . . . but neglected to inform the workers.

Saks was, in essence, a public relations nightmare.

The sort of man who could give Fisk Technologies and its parent, Fisk International, a bad reputation. Still, Fisk used him. He was always the lowest bidder. But on this job, Cushing was put in place to watch him.

Cushing didn't like it.

But he owed everything to Fisk.

So he was going to watch and learn.

Of course, if Saks learned about any of it and the rumors were true, Cushing was a dead man. Crocodiles and snakes would be the least of his worries.

Laying there, he thought about death.

Felt it reaching out for him . . .

12

The ship was now thoroughly encased in the fog.

Even the running lights only cut into its churning, drifting mass a few feet. Gosling stood there, watching it, feeling it, getting to know it. It didn't look much like any fogbank he'd ever been through before. It was too yellow, too luminous. He'd never seen mist sparkle like that, almost as if there was electricity in it, some kind of surging, dormant power. And it was cold.

Jesus, cold like a blast of air from a freezer or an icehouse.

Abnormal.

And it left an almost wet, slimy residue on the skin. And that wasn't right. It was crazy fog, this stuff. And, deep down, he knew it was bad. He knew it was what had knocked out their radio, had made their compass go crazy, shutdown the GPS. The very idea of that compass not being able to find magnetic north, just spinning aimlessly, bothered him in ways that he couldn't even begin to fathom.

Lighting his pipe, he studied the fog more intently. It seemed not to be just blowing past them now, nudged by unseen winds, but actually *mushrooming* before the bow. Spiraling and twisting and sucking like some awful vortex that the ship was being inexorably drawn into.

And the smell.

What was that awful stink?

A thick, organic smell of swamps. Rotting vegetation and hot, putrid decay. A high, wet stench that reminded him of tidal flats and putrefying things vomited onto beaches. It grew stronger and stronger until he had to lean against the pilothouse with dry heaves clawing up his throat.

And then . . . worse.

A pungent, cloying chemical odor of methane, ammonia, fetid gas. He went to his knees, gagging, his lungs rasping for something breathable. But it was no good. It was like trying to breathe through a mouthful of mildewed weeds. The air had gone too heavy or too thin. It was wet and dry, polluted with a loathsome stink, blighted and rank.

Gosling's head spun with crazy lights and a screaming white noise. His skull was echoing with something like the clatter of a thousand wings flapping and flapping until it felt like his head was going to burst.

And then he was breathing again, gasping for breath. The stink, the bad air just a memory. He laid there by the pilothouse door until his head stopped pounding.

He didn't know what had just happened.

But, mentally, he filed it under worst case scenario.

13

"What the fuck is this?" Saks said when he made it out on deck a few minutes later. He took a moment or two to check out the fog, dismissed it, and grabbed Gosling by the shoulder, spinning him around. "You," he said. "I'm talking to you, mister. What the fuck is this?"

Gosling knocked his hand aside. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? Something went shit with the ventilation system below decks for chrissake. I got guys down there passing out and puking their fucking guts out!"

"It's this fog," Gosling said and then, as if realizing how silly that sounded, said, "I'll check it out."

"Damn right you will."

After he left, Saks stood there looking into that boiling fog and wondering what kind of dumbfuck, inbred morons could've navigated them into a mess like this. Goddamn stuff was so thick they wouldn't see a ship until it was three feet away. And it was everywhere. A solid, misting mass of yellow-white fog like nothing he'd ever seen before in his life. It looked so thick you could scoop some up with your fist and put it in a jar. But that wasn't the worse part. The worst part was that it looked blank. Neutral. Nothing. Like they were stuck in the middle of nothing, lost in the static on a TV screen. Even the ship didn't seem to be moving, yet he could feel the engines, hear the bow cutting the drink.

What kind of brownwater, butthole sailors are these?

More people were pouring out on deck now. The ship's crew in addition to Saks's own. They were all looking a little green. Some were being helped along by their mates. One of the engine room swabbies collapsed and started heaving onto the deck. They were all a real mess. A suffocating, acrid smell came from the open hatches.

"Saks," Fabrini said, wiping his hands on his jeans like something greasy was all over them. "What is it? What happened?"

"I don't know. Ventilation system went to hell maybe. Fumes from the engines backed-up. Something."

One of the sailors shook his head. "Ain't no way, mister. Nothing in those turbines smells like that."

Another sailor wiped his yellow face with a rag. "He's right."

"Okay, Einstein," Saks said, "then what the hell was it?"

Nobody said anything.

"This isn't right," Menhaus said, shivering. "It isn't just the engines here, and you all know it. Take a whiff. That fog smells . . . smells like something dead. There's something wrong with it."

"Who asked you?" Saks snapped.

It was at this particular moment that someone started screaming.

Everyone promptly shut up.

All the arguments and grumbling skidded to an echoing halt. The screaming was coming from aft, on the deck. Somewhere out in that maze of equipment and containers

lashed to the spar deck. But in the fog . . . it was really hard to say exactly where. Everyone turned and made ready to go, to investigate . . . *made* ready and that was about it. Because everyone just stood there, faces pale, lips locked tight. No one moved. They all wanted to know what the hell was going on, but nobody wanted to be the first to charge through that fog and see. Maybe it was the sheer quality of that scream which was more than just a scream but the shriek of somebody being slowly roasted over a hot bed of coals. It was loud and shrill like nothing they'd ever heard before.

It was the sound of someone who'd just lost their mind.

"Jesus," Saks said. "We better-"

The screaming broke down into painful, sharp squeals and the guy who was doing it appeared suddenly out of the murk. One of the deckhands. He was soaking wet, wearing rubber chest waders which had fallen down to his hips now. The front of his denim apron was red and glistening and he clawed frantically at it. His face was hooked into an awful, gray, twisted mask and everyone got out of his way.

"Get it offa me get it offa me get it offa me!" he howled, thrashing away across the decks, leaving a trail of blood. "OH JESUS JESUS JESUUUUS IT'S IN ME IT'S YAAAHHHHH . . ."

Before anyone could move, he ran to the railing. They saw him as a dim form convulsing in the fog. And then he threw himself over into the sea.

"Sonofabitch!" Saks said, breaking the spell. "Man overboard! *Man fucking overboard!"*

But no one came.

And everybody just stood there, not knowing what in the hell to do. To a man, nobody even moved an inch toward that spot where he'd gone over. Yes, they'd all been watching him, wanting to help him, but the screams, the blood, the very nightmarish absurdity of the whole situation had kept them from doing anything. They just watched. For it almost appeared as if he'd been *pulled* over the railing, rather than jumped of his own accord. And the splashing they heard . . . huge, echoing splashes . . . it didn't seem like a man could make that kind of noise. It sounded more like somebody had dropped a car into the drink.

There was complete silence for a moment or two.

It was like everything was suspended, locked down tight and motionless. You could hear the water, something that might have been a distant drone of wind, the faint thrum of the engines, but nothing more.

"Man overboard," one of the sailors said very quietly. "Man overboard. There's a man overboard."

But no one seemed concerned.

Reality had taken a beating in the last few minutes and it was still reeling, still trying to find its proper footing and the men with it.

"He's gone," Saks said. "Even if we turned this crate around, we'd never find him. Not in this."

"Oh dear God," Menhaus said. "That man."

One of the sailors ran off and a few seconds later an alarm began to sound. It was high and whining like an air raid siren. The sort of thing that went right up your spine, filled your head, made you want to grind your teeth and squint your eyes.

Despite the racket, everyone started talking at once. Talking almost in low tones like they didn't want the others to hear what they were saying.

Fabrini had his own way of dealing with the unreal, the frightening. He got angry. "This is bullshit," he said, walking around in a loose circle. "This is fucking bullshit. We've gotta turn back. You hear me? We gotta turn back. I ain't gonna die like that."

"Like what?" Saks said.

"Yeah," Menhaus said. "We don't even know what happened."

Fabrini realized they were all staring at him. His swarthy skin had an almost moonish pallor to it now. "You heard that guy for chrissake! All of you heard him! You heard what the fuck he was saying! *Get it off me, get it off me!* He was bleeding like somebody stuck a knife in him! Something got him, right? Something must've bit him!"

Saks rolled his eyes. "For the love of Christ, Fabrini, the guy was nuts. He probably slit his own fucking wrists or something."

No one argued with that hypothesis. It was neat and tight and safe. It made sense. You could fit it into a box, close the lid, and be sure it wouldn't get back out again. And it was much better than the alternative and nobody even wanted to consider that. At least not openly. Not yet.

Saks looked around carefully. He didn't like any of this. He'd seen situations like this in the war. Times when the shit hit the fan from every which direction and the tension was so high you could feel it pulsing from man to man in an unbroken circuit. And when things got that stressed out, men cracked. Men started thinking crazy shit and somebody didn't throw water on it and quick, they started doing crazy shit. And particularly when you had some nut like Fabrini running around feeding their fears, saying the crazy, dangerous things that were on everyone's minds. And when that happened . . . mass hysteria soon set in and people got hurt.

Already he could see everyone pairing off in twos and threes, getting paranoid, not trusting their neighbors. Trench mentality. Jesus H. Christ. Saks didn't need that shit. There was a job needed to be done in French Guiana and he needed these boneheads to do it. A lot of money was riding on the contract and Saks wasn't about to let somebody screw him out of that. After it was done? Then he didn't care, they could de-nut each other with potato peelers, they wanted to. But not now.

Not just yet.

"All right, you guys," he said in a loud, sure voice because he had none other. "Quit acting like a bunch of schoolgirls and try acting like men. That goes double for you, Fabrini. You wanna suck dick and wear a dress, you do it on your own time. Not mine. Everything's fine here."

There was a rabble of conflicting viewpoints.

"Fine?" one of the sailors said. *"Fine?* A guy I knew for three goddamn years just lost his mind and jumped overboard and you call that fine?"

"We got to get out of here," his buddy said. "You know, I got a wife and kids and, shit, I can't be doing this. I can't get involved in this."

Saks wanted to ask him what, what exactly couldn't he be doing or getting involved in. Because nobody knew what any of this was. And as far as he was concerned they were just lost in a freak fogbank and that was that. But he didn't push it. Didn't ask the guy because they were all thinking the same thing and he knew it. They were all

thinking that something had gone seriously sour here . . . only nobody knew just how or why.

Everything seemed unreal, dreamlike, the world as they knew it veering out of control, heading for some dark abyss that would suck them down and fill their lungs with black silt. And through it all, that siren kept shrilling through the fog like the warning cry of some prehistoric bird circling its nest.

The sailor's face had gone all rubbery. "You know I got kids and I don't know what any of this is about . . . I don't like it, I don't like any of this . . . people going crazy and us almost getting poisoned down there. What kind of way is that to run a fucking ship? I . . . I gotta get out of here . . . this is all wrong and I don't know why, but my wife and my fucking kids and *aren't any of you going to do a goddamn thing here but just stare. . . Jesus, what the hell is this?"* He looked around from face to face and knew they were all thinking he was going nuts, but they were all wrong because he was just fine, it was they who were out of touch here. *"Are you all going to just stand there or what?"* he shouted at them. *"C'mon, get us out of here, will ya?"*

Saks laughed at him. "You wanna go home?"

"Damn straight I do," the guy said.

"Well, it's your lucky day because I just happen to have a helicopter shoved up my ass," Saks said. "You get me a greasy spoon and I'll pop that prick out for you, you goddamn pussy."

That got a few chuckles, defused the situation a bit and that had been Saks's plan all along. But it wouldn't last and he knew it.

Sure, the electricity was rising again, Saks saw. Surging and crackling. The group of men before him were on the verge of mob violence only they were all so goddamn confused they didn't know who or what to take it out on.

The sailor wrapped his arms around himself and was shuddering uncontrollably. His teeth were chattering and there was drool running from his lips. "You," he said in an airless voice. "Look at all of you. Standing there. Doing nothing. Just waiting to go crazy! Just waiting for that thing to get you, too!"

"C'mon, buddy," Saks said, putting his arms out to the sailor and indicating to the others with his eyes to do the same. "You need some rest."

The sailor didn't fight. The fact that so many people were suddenly concerned about him did wonders. Four or five of his mates helped him below and this very action seemed to calm everyone.

The siren had ended now and the ship was slowing.

Menhaus said, "What was he talking about? What *thing?"*

"Crazy talk, dipshit. Don't worry about it," Saks said. "Now, listen, everyone. Let's quit acting like a bunch of old ladies and get something going here. You sailors got jobs to do and you better get to 'em before the captain reams your asses clean. Let's go."

Everyone slowly went below decks again. Saks was proud of the way he handled things. But if there was nothing else in this world he was good at, it was handling men and handling trouble. He'd done it in the war and he'd been doing it ever since. Holding hands and kicking asses. He was good at it.

He looked at his own crew. Menhaus and Fabrini stood motionless, wind-up soldiers waiting to be put into action. Ropes of fog clung to them like scarves. "Let's go

find that goddamn captain and see what kind of shit we're into here," he said.

There were no arguments.

14

When Gosling heard the alarm and found out one of his boys jumped overboard, he pretty much went apeshit. He ordered the navigator to bring the ship around. Workboats were lowered and a search was carried out for Stokes, the kid who'd jumped over the side. The search went on for nearly an hour in that moist, rank pea soup, led by Gosling himself, but it was hopeless and everyone knew it. First thing he did when he was back on the ship was to jump up and down on his sailors, reaming them out about protocol concerning men overboard. When he was done jamming maritime law and regulations down their throats, he went up one side of Saks and down the other. By the time he was done, Saks had a sore asshole. Saks wasn't the sort to take crap like that, but Gosling was his kind of man — tough as saddlehide and with a set of balls on him he should've been pushing around in a wheelbarrow.

"You want to run my ass up the flagpole, Gosling," Saks said after he ordered his boys away, "you take me aside and do it. You don't treat me like that in front of my men."

But Gosling wasn't having it. Saks was a tough old bastard himself — just ask him — but Gosling towered over him by nearly a foot and looked like he'd kicked more balls in his time than the Dallas Cowboys. "Well, see, you're wrong there, Mr. Saks, dead-ass fucking wrong," he explained. "On this ship I'm the First. First Mate. That means I'm God and Ghandi and Hitler all rolled into one. I run this goddamn ship and if you're on it, then I run you, too. You're *mine.* When the shit comes down, I'm there with the biggest fucking shovel you ever saw and if you don't believe that, I'll crack that shovel right across the back of your fucking skull, scoop up what runs out and throw it right over the side. You can believe that."

"You better watch that mouth," Saks told him.

"And you better shut your pisshole before I throw your ass into the deep six," Gosling told him. "We lost a man out there. And if you or your boys had gotten off your dead asses and alerted us to the situation a little sooner, that man might be alive now. So don't give me any shit, Mr. Saks, because you do and you're going to look real funny with my size twelve boot hanging sideways out of your ass."

Saks saw that intimidation wasn't going to work with this guy, so he just started laughing. "I like you, Gosling, you're a grade-A prick."

With that, Saks left.

And Gosling stood there, taking hard breaths and thinking hard thoughts. He didn't need Saks and his shit because right then, the First had a full plate. Sure, the alarm had been sounded, but not soon enough for Gosling's liking. In situations like that, it was never soon enough. And why those goddamn mother-rapers — his own crew included — had stood there while Stokes danced over the railing, was beyond him. It should have been obvious what the kid was attempting, particularly given his state of mind.

Gosling just shook his head, watching the fog get thicker and their chances get thinner.

15

George Ryan had been sleeping when the madness hit. As had Cushing and Soltz. They came awake at roughly the same time, gagging and coughing and finding it impossible to draw so much as a breath. They heard the men stampeding in the corridors outside, but decided not to join them.

In fact, it really wasn't even a choice.

Soltz passed out before he made it to the porthole. George made it there and Cushing just barely did. Within the span of a few minutes it had all passed and they were left lying on the floor, leaning up against bulkheads, their throats raw and dry as desert sand.

They never heard the screaming.

Never even knew what hell had been let loose on the decks above. Everything they would learn, they would learn later and in varying detail from the others. For now, it was just enough for them to be able to breathe.

"What happened?" Soltz asked them.

"A very interesting question," Cushing said, coughing.

George ignored the sarcasm of that. "We better get topside and see what this is." Soltz said, "Are we sinking?"

He was staring up into the rafters of the cabin, at the lifejackets and survival suits hanging up there.

"No, we're not sinking."

Cushing was staring out the porthole by this time. "Look at that fog," he said. "You ever see anything like it?"

16

Gosling had one last pipe before he went to the captain.

He stood out on the hurricane deck, staring out over the bow, feeling the wind in his face and watching tendrils of mist snake over the forward decks. There wasn't much of a stink to the fog anymore. Any that he noticed, that was. Just sort of a vague dank, dark smell about it. And he had to concentrate to really notice it. They'd been in the fog for upwards of three hours now. Nothing had changed. The radio was still picking up only dead air and the compass, though not spinning frantically now, was moving in a lazy, jittery circle, counterclockwise, as if it could not detect magnetic north. The gyrocompass was caught in a perpetual lazy roll. The RDF was dead and the SatNav was equally lifeless. It was like being in a vacuum.

Nothing was working right.

Nothing was as it should have been.

Gosling kept telling himself it was the fog, freak weather patterns, atmospheric disturbances, sunspots. Nothing seemed to fit, though. He'd been in plenty of heavy fogs, but none of them like this.

"Shit," he said to himself. "Sonofabitch."

He went to the captain's cabin and knocked gently on the door before entering. Things weren't terribly rigid or strict aboard the *Mara Corday,* but the captain was still the ship's master and deserved respect.

Captain Morse was seated at his desk, his fingers drumming nervously. Morse was a heavy man, a curious combination of fat and muscle. He was clean-shaven and slicked his hair straight back from his brow. Gosling had never seen him smile.

And he was not smiling now. "Well?" he said.

"No dice, Sir," Gosling told him. "Stokes is gone. If those idiots would have told me we had a man overboard . . . well, piss on it. Stokes is gone. In this fog, well, we couldn't see a damn thing. It's worse when you get water-level, Captain . . . thicker, smellier . . . I couldn't even see the boys in my own damn boat, let alone anything floating out there."

Morse's deadpan face did not change. "Tell me about it."

"Nothing to tell." Gosling sat down and pulled his watch cap off, smoothing down his hair. "Well, nothing worth mentioning. Some of the boys were getting a little spooked down there."

Morse raised an eyebrow. It arched like the back of an inchworm. "Let's have it."

So Gosling told him . . . what there was to tell. How the fog was thick and membranous below on the sea which was flatter than a sheet of glass. How they couldn't see a damn thing, how they lost sight of the *Mara Corday* almost instantly.

"What was spooking them?"

Gosling said he didn't know exactly what it was. Everyone was wound up tighter than trampoline springs, so it probably made things worse than they might have been. The only way the two boats kept in contact was with the bullhorn and searchlights. "We kept hearing sounds out there, Skipper. I don't know . . . splashing sounds, things moving in the water. Big things. Maybe a pod of whales moving by, I don't know exactly. In that

fog, well it got under the mens' skins and I didn't blame 'em either. I didn't care much for it myself."

He was leaving out things and Morse knew it, but he didn't press. Gosling wasn't about to tell the ship's master that a deckhand named Crycek in the other boat started screaming, saying he saw something with a long neck and eyes watching him from the fog. That one of his men claimed he heard Stokes calling out there . . . except that it sounded like maybe his mouth was full of mud and kelp. Gosling had heard it, too, but he couldn't say how it was a human voice. It was something, something bad, he just wasn't sure what.

"Anything else?"

Gosling shrugged. "Like I said, sea is flat as glass. Not so much as a ripple. Patches of seaweed floating around, rotten-smelling stuff. Given the calm and the weed, could be we're farther into the Sargasso than we should be."

Morse just nodded. "Could be a lot of things, I guess. What have you got for me, Mister?" he asked. "What happened to Stokes?"

Gosling didn't have any real answers there, either. Marx, the chief engineer, had a couple deckhands go into the aft starboard ballast tank with the first assistant engineer, Hupp. There was only four feet of water in there, but the intake was clogged. It turned out it was clogged with weeds. Hupp cleaned it out and about that time, Stokes started screaming, fighting his way to the hatch.

"I don't know, Skipper, there was blood all over the damn place. Around the hatch, on the deck, bulkheads, going up the companionway. Christ if I know what happened. Maybe he got claustrophobic and . . . well, nothing really explains it, but . . ."

"But what?"

Gosling just shook his head. "Lot of people heard what he was screaming about. That there was something in him or biting him, something like that. I suppose we could have sucked just about anything into the tank."

Morse didn't doubt that. The size of those ballast tanks, a shark could've been at home in there. Or a whale. Not that those things could get in through the intake. But smaller fish did quite frequently. Mollusks, shrimp, mussels, you name it.

"Something that bit him," Morse said. "Chewed into him. Hmm. Is that tank sealed?"

"Yes, sir, it's secured, all right."

They talked about the fog, their predicament. The chances things might clear out there.

"I wish there was something I could tell you, but this is all beyond me." Gosling sighed. "I've been sailing a long time, Captain. We both have. I've never seen anything like this. It's not in the books or out of it."

Morse's face did not change. "Tell me something, Paul. Anything."

"Okay. Radio's working, but all we're picking up is static. RDF is also working but, again, it's not picking up a goddamn thing. SatNav seems operational, but it, too, is locking in on zilch" He shook his head. "It's all pretty crazy. Satellite could be messed-up. I've seen it happen before, but we should get something. It's almost like it's not even up there anymore."

Which was crazy. He didn't need to tell Morse how GPS worked. That the GPS

was a satellite-based navigation system provided by a network of no less than twenty-four satellites in separate orbital paths. Sure, one might go out and maybe even two or three . . . but all twenty-four?

Morse considered it. “All right. How about radar?”

“Working. Everything checks. We’re not reading a damn thing. No land masses, no ships. Nothing. Now and then we’ll get a few blips, then they disappear. Could be reflections or nothing at all. I really don’t know. Depthfinder’s okay. We’re reading bottom at twelve-hundred feet. Seems pretty consistent. Compass is moving counterclockwise still.”

“Mechanical?”

“No way. Back-up’s doing the same. Even the one I keep in my kit is doing it. Gyro can’t grab a fix, either. LORAN’s belly-up. There’s nothing wrong with our instruments, Captain. It’s gotta be this fog or this sea or something.” He shook his head. “I pulled her off autopilot . . . I got Iverson on the wheel now. Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I just don’t trust technology today.”

Morse stared at his hands. There were callused and rough from a lifetime spent battling the wind and weather. They shook slightly. “We better keep running quarter-speed until . . .”

Gosling licked his lips. “Until what?”

“Until we get out of this”

Gosling just nodded. There was really nothing else they could do. He knew Morse was thinking the same crazy things he was. Crazy, comic book shit about the Devil’s Triangle and the Sargasso Sea and all the silly stories they had inspired. But neither would speak of it.

“What about that smell before?” Morse asked.

“All I can tell you is that it’s gone. It didn’t come from us, I know that much. It came with the fog. Whatever sense that makes.” He chewed his lower lip, thinking. “It was more than a stink, Captain. We both know that. It was almost like there suddenly was no air.”

“Keep that to yourself” Morse said.

They sat there in silence for a moment. Then Gosling cleared his throat. “You ever seen anything like this?”

Morse pursed his lips. “What do you think?”

“Yeah, I guess. Nobody’s seen this before. Have you checked your watch?”

“My watch?”

Morse had a digital. It seemed to be operating.

Gosling had a diving watch. The hands were running backward. “And it’s not just mine.”

Morse exhaled. “I think,” he said slowly, “we’re in deep shit.”

17

About ten minutes later, Morse met with Saks and his crew. It was not something he was particularly looking forward to. He met with them in the observation lounge and answered their questions. The observation lounge was a space generally reserved for the brass of the shipping company and assorted VIPs: politicians, privileged guests etc. It contained a wet-bar, marble fireplace, imported leather furniture, and gleaming walnut paneling. Morse hoped, maybe in some small way, that the lavish accoutrements would give Saks the impression that he was thought highly of by the crew and officers of the *Mara Corday* . . . and particularly, the captain himself.

Of course, it was all a ruse. Morse was no more impressed by the man than his First was, but he knew all about men like Saks. If you could control him, you could control his people.

"The sea can get a little freakish this time of year," Morse told them. "I've seen fogs wrap up a ship for two, three days. It's nothing to worry about."

Saks nodded. "That's what I figured. You idiots hear what the captain said?"

Fabrini just shook his head. "Yeah, we heard, we heard."

"Good. Now you can quit with the ghost stories all ready."

"There really is no reason for alarm," Morse told them, maintaining his demeanor, just damn glad they couldn't see him on the inside — the quivering, white-knuckled thing he had become.

"Shit," Fabrini said. "Do you guys even know where we are?"

"We're on course. But we're moving slow. We don't have a choice in this soup."

Saks scowled at that. "How much of a delay are we talking here? I got a contract to fill, you know."

"A day, maybe two. No more than that."

Soltz shifted uncomfortably in his seat. His glasses reflected the fluorescents above. "What about the man who threw himself overboard?"

"A terrible business," the captain said. "We'll never know for sure what happened there. When we reach port there'll be a formal investigation. But even then . . . who can say?"

Fabrini giggled dryly. "Who can say? What kind of bullshit is that?" he wanted to know. "We saw him. We all saw him. The guy was covered in blood screaming that something had him, something was inside him."

Saks's heavy brow furrowed. "Shut the hell up, Fabrini. You saw a guy with blood on him. A guy totally out of his mind for chrissake. If he said Jesus and Mary were chasing him down the hallway with chainsaws would you believe that too?"

Fabrini shook his head slowly from side to side. "You know, Saks, you're really starting to piss me off here. What's with you? What's with all you guys?" He looked around at them with accusing eyes. "You know something's totally fucked up here. This fog ain't right. The captain here is serving up the bullshit on a platter and expecting us to chew and swallow and Saks? Saks is pretending nothing has happened. Well, I ain't fucking buying it. No way. And neither are any of you."

"Jesus H. Christ," Saks said in disgust.

Soltz just shook his head. “He’s right. Something’s wrong here.”

Cook and Menhaus kept silent, but their minds were going full tilt. Cook was the sort of guy who rarely said anything. Menhaus didn’t like confrontation; he would wait and see what the majority thought and then adopt this thinking himself.

The next one to speak was George Ryan. What he had to say was simple and to the point. “What is it you think *is* happening, Fabrini?”

Cushing nodded, smiling thinly, seeming to enjoy the anarchy. “Yes, tell us.”

All eyes were on Fabrini now. His dark face was somehow flushed, a vein at his temple throbbing. “I don’t know what happened. But it sure as hell wasn’t just some guy going nuts and jumping overboard. There’s more to it than that. Christ, look at that fog. I’ve seen fog before and it doesn’t fucking glow. And it doesn’t suck away the air.”

Captain Morse just stared, then cleared his throat. “I’ll be the first to admit we’ve experienced some strange phenomena here, but nothing that has happened is what I would call supernatural, gentlemen. I’ve been sailing the Atlantic for over thirty-five years and it still never fails to surprise me.”

“What is it *you* think happened, then?” Cushing said, amused by it all.

“I don’t know really. My guess is that we experienced some bizarre atmospheric anomaly. The fog is just the result of some strange weather pattern, maybe the sun acting on a cold sea. The lack of air and those gases that nearly suffocated us all, those could have came from a mile down . . . a bubble of methane, maybe. It’s happened before.”

“That’s right,” Saks said. “A day or so and we’ll be out of this, so all of you knock it off with the spooky stories here.”

Cushing and George looked at each other. Like Fabrini, they knew bullshit when they heard it. They knew when somebody was telling them something just to shut them up and that’s exactly what was going on here. The real ugly, unpleasant part of it all, they knew, was that nobody knew what was going on. And that was scary.

“This is pointless,” Fabrini said and stomped off.

Soltz followed suit.

There was nothing more to say.

18

Gosling wasn't present at the session between Morse and Saks's crew. But the captain filled him in on it. Morse wasn't a guy who enjoyed lying. He would've liked to have told the others the truth. The only problem being he didn't know *what* the truth was. No one did. Yes, something was wrong, but what? They were sailing blind here. No navigational aids. No radio contact. Even the radar was acting screwy. The thick fog made visual navigation impossible . . . there were no stars that could be seen. It was all very disturbing.

Gosling had never been in a situation like this.

It was insane.

He assumed they were somewhere between Norfolk and South America, which was pretty much saying they were a needle in the biggest haystack in creation. *Somewhere between Norfolk and French Guiana.*

That was slick. Like telling someone the contact lens they'd dropped was somewhere between Milwaukee and Buffalo.

But where else could we be? he asked himself. Sure, the fog and everything else is goddamn strange, but it doesn't mean much in itself. We're caught in some freakish weather pattern here and like Morse said, it'll blow over sooner or later. So what is it I'm worried about?

He had no answer to that.

What you're worried about, a low, menacing voice in his head said, *is that Morse is wrong. And down deep, you know he's wrong. This is no fucking weather pattern, freak or otherwise. Weather patterns might screw with the radio or the RDF, but they couldn't touch the GPS and sure as hell not the radar. And if that isn't enough, then why don't you tell me about the compasses? Why are they spinning counterclockwise? Why the hell can't they zero in on magnetic north? You've never seen one act like that and you know it. Even the feel of the sea is wrong. The water's too calm and that smell is just not right. You have no explanation for any of this and if you did, you wouldn't want to admit it.*

Licking his lips, Gosling left his cabin.

He would not think anymore.

That was the way it would have to be from now on. No thinking, no theorizing, no wild guesses. Whatever was happening here would have to take care of itself. The wheels were spinning now and he'd just have to wait and see where they took him. Took all of them.

But, again, that damn voice, sharp and cutting in his head: *You know very well what you're avoiding here, Paul. You know very well. You've heard about things like this from sailors too drunk to know better. In books. On TV. You've heard about strange seas like this. Places where compasses spin and technologies die a hard death. Where nothing is right. Where everything is wrong.*

Dead Sea.

"Dead Sea" not as in the Dead Sea itself, but as in a phenomena which has been reported since men began sailing the seas. Strange becalmed bodies of water where everything suddenly goes insane. Where men kill themselves rather than face the reality

of what has happened to them. The Bermuda Triangle. The Devil's Sea. The Sargasso Sea. Ship's graveyards. Maritime dead zones few return from.

He shook his head. No. Absolutely not.

I will not accept this.

He started walking again. Moving blindly, not seeing anything. The gears of his brain were revolving madly now and it was all going so fast he could make no sense of any of it. And he didn't want to. He didn't plan on touring the ship, but this is what he did. He walked the decks from the stern to the bow, visited the boat decks and checked the equipment stowed on the spar deck. He checked hatch covers and derricks. He went up to the pilothouse, made sure Iverson was steering the ship with his hands and not his feet, staying true on course. Then down into the lounge and messrooms, crew's hall and forward cargo holds. He walked aimlessly, lost in thought. He hadn't planned on making the galley his ultimate destination, yet, somehow, he knew that's exactly where he was going.

The night kitchen.

It was kept running even in the wee hours, for there was always someone on duty or out on watch that needed a meal or a hot cup of coffee. Gosling walked in there, found Bobby Smalls, the second cook and one of the new porters on duty. They nodded to him and Gosling nodded back. The porter was filling Tupperware containers with cold cuts, pickles, cheeses, and veggies for late-night sandwiches for the dog watch crew.

The chief steward was the head cook, but the second cook did all the baking and prep work. The porters handled clean-up and serving.

"Fog thinning any?" Smalls asked, as he kneaded a huge glob of dough with his fists.

"Not yet," Gosling told him.

The porter arranged condiments on a serving platter and headed off to the crew's mess with them.

Gosling walked around the kitchen. The stainless steel counters gleamed and the tiled floors smelled of pine cleaners. He examined the rows of shining stoves, peaked aft into the pantry, ran a hand along the cool steel door of the immense walk-in freezers. He rummaged through cupboards, scrutinized foodstuffs, stared into drawers of cutlery.

"You need something, First," Smalls said, without looking away from his dough, "ya'll let me know."

Gosling smiled. "I don't need anything, Bobby. Just restless."

Smalls was in his fifties, thickset with a graying crewcut and shaggy sideburns that angled up to his cheeks. Almost muttonchops, but not quite. Gave him the look of a Victorian London cop, but his West Texas twang quickly erased that.

"Sure, we're all restless here, we're all thinking things," Smalls said.

"You knew Stokes, didn't you, Bobby?" Gosling said, trying to sound like he was just making conversation. "The kid who-"

"Sure, I knew him. He was a good boy. This was only his second run. But, yeah, I knew him."

"He ever seem . . . well, *funny* to you?"

"Funny? You mean could he tell a good joke? Yes, sir, that kid had some mouth on him."

"That's not what I mean," Gosling said.

Smalls nodded. He still had not looked up from his dough. "You mean, do I think he was crazy? Prone to nervous breakdowns? The heebie-jeebies? No, Mr. Gosling, I do not. He was as balanced as any other, I figure"

"Yeah, I figured that, too"

Smalls began pressing out his dough on the floured stainless steel table. "Funny that fog out there. Thick like that, shiny like that. Haven't seen anything like it in years." That gave Gosling pause. "You've seen this before?"

Smalls did look up now. His eyes were gray as puddles on concrete. "You telling me you've spent a lifetime sailing the Atlantic and you never came across anything funny out this way?"

Gosling wetted his lips. "Maybe once or twice. Minor things. Bad compass deviation . . . things like that. Atmospheric problems, you'd call them."

Smalls didn't look like he believed that. He went back to his dough, rolled it out with firm strokes of the rolling pin which was almost as big as a baseball bat. "I been on these waters going on thirty years now. Years ago, I was a deckhand on a bulk freighter. The *Chester R.* We were bringing a belly full of grain out to Bermuda from Charleston. About an hour out, we made radio with Hamilton. Same old, same old. Then we sailed into this fog . . . a lot like we got out there. It was a real mother, that fog. Thick, smelled funny, had a weird sort of shine to it."

Gosling's throat was dry. The comparison was pretty accurate so far. "What happened?"

"The sort of things that happen in these waters when some of that yellow fog swallows up your vessel — you know, our compass began to spin, we couldn't find our heading. RDF went toes-up, LORAN was all tittywonkle," he said, without a trace of emotion. "Yeah, we were spooked pretty bad. The lot of us. Radio was shit, nothing but dead air on VHF and side-band. Radar kept showing us things that were there, then gone. This was the days before GPS, but I don't think it would have mattered. You think so?"

Gosling said he thought probably not. "How long were you in it?"

Smalls shrugged. "About an hour, according to the chrono. We were sailing blind all that time. We missed Bermuda even though we hadn't changed our heading. A few degrees could have made us miss it, you know, could have put us on this side of the Azores we kept it up. But that's not where we ended up. When the fog died out, we weren't anywhere near Bermuda and we sure as hell weren't out in the middle of the Atlantic steaming across the pond like you might think. No sir, we were due north of the Leeward Islands down in the Caribbean."

Gosling said, "You telling me you were running east and ended up a thousand miles south of your last position? And within an hour?"

"That's what happened, all right." Smalls began cutting biscuits out of the dough with an aluminum cutter. "Hard to believe, ain't it? Well, ya'll imagine our poor captain trying to explain a navigational tanglefuck like that to the ship's owners. Wasn't pretty. Guess what I'm saying here, First, is that you start playing out in the Sargasso like we are and the stars are right, conditions favorable for funny business, and you run into what we're running into. Folks these days, they call it the Bermuda Triangle and what not. But I'm old school. Sargasso to me. The Sargasso Sea. That triangle they bullshit about just

touches the southern edge of the Sargasso, but most of those ships and planes that have trouble are really in the Sargasso. I should know, on account I was on one of them."

Gosling knew Smalls too well to think that the man was spinning tales here. But the Sargasso Sea was no true mystery. It existed, all right. It was an oval region of the western North Atlantic, roughly between the east coast of the U.S., the West Indies and the Azores. Unlike other seas that were bordered by land, the Sargasso was bordered by ocean currents — the Gulf Stream, the North Atlantic, Canary, and North Equatorial — which flowed in a clockwise pattern around it, creating a deadly calm within its boundaries. Because of the calm, the Sargasso was a great floating desert of sargassum seaweed. In the old days of sail, it had been called the Sea of Lost Ships because of the many craft that had been becalmed or trapped in its vast weed banks. And in the realm of maritime folklore, it had a centuries-old reputation of disappearing vessels and derelict ships, ghost ships and sea-monsters and bizarre phenomena.

But Gosling knew those tales were just bullshit.

They couldn't be anything else.

Modern tankers and freighters could plow through the Sargasso without hesitating. It was only smaller boats that got their props tangled with weed. And as for the rest . . . well, sailors liked to tell stories and you could leave it at that.

"Well, I'll keep it in mind," Gosling said.

"You do that," Smalls said to him. "We're bound to come out of it sooner or later. Maybe we'll be on course and maybe we'll be down by the Bahamas . . . or maybe we'll be somewhere else entirely."

Somewhere else entirely.

That last bit was loaded with allusions Gosling wasn't about to let himself think about. Not yet. He told Smalls they'd get together and discuss it all in more depth later on and Smalls said that his calendar was wide open for the foreseeable future.

And again, Gosling didn't care for what that implied.

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Gosling thought: *What the hell is it I'm looking for?*

But he didn't know, couldn't know. Not yet. He was down in engineering, near the stern of the ship, making his way down the port side companionway to the steering flat. On the metal steps which were painted an abysmal off-yellow that reminded Gosling of the color of vomit, he was seeing the darker splotches and stains of Stokes' blood. You could maybe write it off in your mind as worn-in grime or grease, but if you knew what happened . . . could see in your mind Stokes stumbling up the companionway, spilling blood and screaming, his face hooked into a rictus of terror and agony . . . it wasn't quite so easy.

It was blood.

Probably take lacquer thinner to get the dried stains out.

Gosling moved down the steps, studying the bloodstains, keeping his boots from making contact with them the same way a kid avoided sidewalk cracks. He wasn't even aware he was doing so. At the bottom of the companionway, he could gauge Stokes' mad flight up to the spar deck. Yes, Gosling could gauge it . . . but he could never understand the depths of stark madness that had peeled the kid's mind free.

There were a few flecks on the bulkheads that hadn't been mopped away.

Below, in the steering flat, Gosling paused.

Still, he was not sure what he was looking for. Stokes had lost his mind here and maybe Gosling thought he might find it, laying about somewhere like a cast-off rag. The steering flat was a huge room in which the massive gear quadrant that moved the rudder was located. Just off it, was the shop with its assorted lathes and drill presses, grinders and milling machines.

Gosling went forward to the main engine room, feeling the hum and vibration of the gigantic plant. Boilers produced steam which was fed to the high and low pressure turbines which were connected to the propeller shaft by reduction gears. This room — if room it could be called — was cavernous, you could have dropped a three-story house in there and had plenty of elbow space. Everywhere, the engine room was webbed in piping, ducts, and armored hoses. One of the assistant engineers was studying a bank of overhead gauges.

Gosling breezed past him and went down the companionway to the pump deck, closed the hatch to get the thrum of the engines out of his ears. They weren't as loud below, but you could feel them just fine. Here, on the pump deck, was a veritable maze of manifolds, ballast pumps, distribution piping, and valves. The tanks themselves held well over three million gallons of water at any one time.

Gosling stood before the aft starboard tank, studying the hatch.

Here, too, the blood had been mopped away, but you could still see signs of it where the bulkhead met the deck. Other than that, there was nothing really to suggest a tragedy here.

Yet, Gosling could almost feel *something* buzzing silently in the air.

But he knew it was just the silence. Even with the throb of the turbines above, it was complete and thick and somehow chilling in its total lack of life. It reminded him of

someone holding their breath, waiting, waiting. A nameless hush. The sort of empty silence you would hear in a tomb.

What happened here, Stokes? What drove you mad?

Finding any evidence in this arterial labyrinth of conduits and pipes, tangled hoses and jutting equipment would be no easy feat. Yet, Gosling felt compelled to look and keep looking. It would have taken thirty men all day to canvas the pump deck minutely, and even then the margin of missing something was high. Gosling turned on all the lights and began searching, moving in what he thought would have been Stokes' general path.

And it didn't take him as long as he thought.

Jammed between the metal floor grating and the lines snaking from an electrical junction box, he found something. Using a screwdriver, he dug it out.

At first Gosling thought it was a horn. It was a small, three-inch section of hard, chitinous flesh. Mottled brown, dead, covered with tiny sharp spines. It had been cut from something. Severed. It ran from the thickness of a cigar to a pointy little tip. It was no horn. Neither was it some discarded length of rubber hose or plastic tubing like he had also first thought. It was a piece of something. Like the tail end of a snake or some other animal.

Gosling prodded it with the blade of the screwdriver.

He couldn't bring himself to actually touch it. Something about it was revolting.

It was slimed in strands of some snotty, gluey material like transparent silicone caulk.

It's nothing, he told himself. *Nothing to be concerned about. If you're thinking this might have something to do with Stokes, then I would have to say you're definitely barking up the wrong tree here. You're simply assuming too much, my friend.*

But was he?

He wrapped the section carefully in a rag and, even more carefully, stuffed it into the pocket of his pea coat. It could've been nothing, but it could've been everything. He had never seen anything quite like it. But that meant nothing in of itself. The sea was full of strange creatures and new ones were discovered all the time.

Was this part of the thing that had bit Stokes? Was that even feasible? Had it got at him and he sliced it in half?

Because, regardless of whether that scenario made sense or not, it looked like a knife had done the job.

Marx, the chief engineer, had it wrapped in a handkerchief. Just a garden variety lockblade knife. Lot of the crew members carried them in sheaths at their belt. Gosling carried one himself.

"Found it about an hour ago," Marx said to the first mate. "Got kicked under a boiler coupling . . . maybe by Stokes, maybe someone else."

Sitting there with the Chief in the Engine Control Room, Gosling was looking at that knife. There was something on the blade. Something crusty and dark. Could have been blood . . . or rust. Maybe it had been lying under the coupling for the past two or three voyages . . . but Gosling didn't think so.

Looking at it, thinking of what was wrapped up in his pocket, he felt his mouth go very dry. "You suppose . . . you suppose Stokes sliced himself open with it?" he asked, though he did not believe it for a moment. Not now and maybe not before.

"Dunno," Marx said. "Could be. Could be how it happened."

Marx was a big fellow with a head bald as a mountaintop and a thick gray beard, ZZ Top style, that hung down to his chest. There was a Harley tattoo on his left forearm and an old Molly Hatchet insignia on his right. He looked very much like a biker and very little like a freighter engineer. But he was the Chief and he was the best.

Hupp, the first assistant engineer, was the only other person in the Engine Control Room. Years ago, there might have been a dozen men, but these days with advanced computer controls and desktop interfaces, it didn't take many men to man the station. The room was pretty much wall to wall video screens and computer terminals, monitors featuring displays of various systems. Most engine room functions could be manipulated by merely selecting the diagram of the system via touch screen and highlighting it, bringing up its menu.

Morse came through the door. He nodded to Gosling and Marx, went over to Hupp at his console. "You went in that tank with Stokes and the other man. What happened?"

Hupp went through it all for what seemed the fiftieth time in the past few hours. "I cleaned some weeds out of the intake . . . Stokes, he was behind me, he said there was something in the water. Fish, I figured. We're always sucking fish through the screens, Sir, nothing new there. Well, we must have pulled in a lot of weeds because the mud box was full of them . . ."

Gosling just listened, hearing it now for the second or third time himself. The ballast intake was fitted with a grid to filter out large objects and a finer screen in the mudbox for the removal of smaller objects.

". . . I replaced the screen and . . . well, Stokes said something brushed his leg. Something like that. I didn't think much of it. Well, he took out his knife and slashed at something in the water . . . I don't know what . . . and I told him to quit fooling around and lend a hand. We were replacing the second screen. You know how they rot away. Anyway, Stokes cut himself with his goddamn knife and . . . well, couldn't have been more than a few moments later he started screaming and thrashing. He yanked off his coat and threw it at us, then he stumbled into the water, thrashing around. Before we could get

to him, he was up and out of there. That's all I know."

Morse just nodded. He turned to Gosling and Marx. "All right," he said. "Let's go have a look in that tank."

Down to the pump deck they went, pausing before the service hatch to the starboard aft ballast tank. There was a strong smell of stagnation and dank saltwater about it. The hatch was secured with a couple dozen bolts. Marx put a ratchet on them and they creaked at first, his muscles bulging, then they came loose easily. It hadn't been that easy when Hupp had removed it. The bolts had been rusted in place since the last time the ship was serviced and they had to use an air ratchet to get them loose.

When Marx was down to the last few bolts, Morse said, "I'm thinking about what Hupp said. About how Stokes had cut himself. Maybe he got blood in the water and maybe it attracted something."

It was a leap, but considering what had happened and what was happening, not much of one. Gosling thought it over, his brain churning up nasty images of creatures that could smell blood in the water: sharks, piranhas, other things he didn't want to think about.

Marx loosened the last two bolts and Gosling helped him lift the hatch free. The stench of stagnation and cloying wetness was stronger now, wafting up from the depths of the ballast tank. It reminded Gosling of tidal pools and stranded marine life. Morse and he donned the rubber chest waders Marx had set out for them, yellow hardhats with highpower halogen lights strapped to them.

"You hear any funny business down there, Chief," Morse said. "Feel free to send in the Marines."

Marx offered him a sly grin and handed both men gaffs, being it was the only thing resembling a weapon that engineering could come up with on such short notice. They were basically meat hooks screwed onto the ends of broom handles.

Without further ado, Morse clicked on his light and slid through the manway, his rubber boots finding an uneasy purchase on the slimy iron rungs leading down. One step at a time he descended into the murk and Gosling was right behind him. The ballast tank was huge, about the size of a basketball court. At the bottom of the service ladder, Morse's boots slipped into the brown, stinking water. It came up past his hips.

Gosling eased into it, feeling the dank chill of it wafting around him.

"How's the water down there?" Marx called from above.

"Nice," Morse called up to him. "Strip down to your skivvies and take a dip with us." Marx chuckled from the hatch above, his voice echoing around with an eerie resonance.

No, there was nothing funny about the sound of that laughter and standing in the sluicing brown water, it was even worse. Gosling hadn't been down in a ballast tank in years. Not since he was a deckhand and had to clean them out. Even when they were drained, there was still a foot of oozing sediment that had to be hosed out. And right then, Gosling could feel the muck with each step he took. Every movement made was amplified by the cavernous tank, coming back at them with volume. The darkness was thick down there, a mist wafting off that filthy water. A few dead fish and bits of weed floated on the oily surface.

They played their helmet lights around and there was nothing to see but water and

silt built up on the walls.

The stench was stronger now, almost overpowering. Like decay and brackish swamps, putrescent mud. Water was dripping. The air close and clammy.

They started off and Gosling could feel the breath in his lungs, the papery rustle of his heart. He'd never been prone to claustrophobia . . . but he was feeling it today. The tank was like some immense, submerged casket, the air thin and moist, all that brown, smelling water like some heady organic soup drained from a primordial, subterranean sea.

Morse led them forward, the beams of their headlamps bobbing and jumping, creating vast shadows and murky forms that rose from the mildewed water.

"See anything?" Morse asked and his voice sounded dry, airless.

"Not a damn thing," Gosling said, panning his light looking for . . . he did not know what he was looking for. But maybe something that could smell blood in the water, something with teeth.

Morse stopped. "You hear something?" he said.

Gosling just shook his head, sucking that charnel mist into his lungs. He listened and heard only the drip of water from some intake pipe. He scanned his light back and forth. Grotesque, huge shadows crawled around them. Clots of weeds drifted past, a stray cigarette butt.

"What did you hear?"

Morse just shrugged, looked like he wasn't going to say anything at all and then, almost in a whisper, he said, "Funny . . . sound. A sliding, swishing sound . . . but just for a second there. Behind us maybe."

They put their lights back there and there was nothing but a few stray fish floating belly up. Morse motioned with his gaff and they moved forward, stepping carefully now. The water had been calm before, but now there were ripples and secret currents. Gosling was wound-up tight and he figured Morse was about the same.

"There," Gosling said. "What the hell is that?"

It was something floating in the water, just beneath the surface. It could have been a large patch of weeds or maybe a scum of filth, but neither man thought so. They stood there looking at it, then at each other, then slowly — very slowly — they moved toward it. Whatever it was, it began to move and bob in the wake they created. Morse reached out with his gaff, his hands so tight on the handle that Gosling could hear his knuckles popping. In the splash of light from the first mate's helmet, Morse's face was sallow and lined with shadow. He looked confused, frightened maybe. There was no reason for it, not yet, but it was in both of them, chewing away at something vital and important within them.

"Let's see," Morse said, wielding his hook with a fixed, deadly intensity. "Let's see what . . . this . . . is . . ."

He caught it with the gaff and Gosling tensed, made ready to swing his hook . . . was certain that it would begin flapping and writhing, but it did neither. It was nothing alive. As Morse brought it up from the water, they both saw it was only a denim work jacket.

"Stokes'?" Morse wondered aloud.

He told Gosling to get rid of it, knowing something like that could easily plug one of the lines. Gosling took hold of it and brought it back to the ladder. He went up half

way and Marx caught the jacket with his own gaff and hauled it up.

Gosling went back down.

He was beginning to feel very ridiculous. Ridiculous because he wasn't the high-strung sort. Fear, real fear, wasn't something he had much truck with or use for. The ballast tank was just a ballast tank, not the home of some flesh-eating monster. It was time to start acting like a man here. There was a job to be done.

His chest inflated, heat burning where there'd only been a cold trembling before, he started back to Morse. Made it most of the way and then stopped. Stopped cold as if someone had taken hold of him.

Stopped there, he breathed slowly, waiting.

The sound.

It came again. A sort of muffled splashing noise, like something large had just dipped beneath the surface. Gosling panned his light over near the far side and, yes, there were ripples moving gently in his direction. They were too far away to have been caused by either himself or Morse. Then, he heard it again . . . this time from over near the captain. That same, almost hissing splash of something submerging.

More ripples, this time from behind him.

He felt something in his chest unwind, open like a flower. Yes, there was something in the tank with them. Something moving through that dirty water and moving with great stealth, playing a demented game of hide and seek. And all Gosling could think was that it sounded large and as he thought this, his flesh went tight and rigid as if his skin was preparing to be attacked. He stood there, waiting for whatever it was, waiting for something to take hold of his ankle or loop around his throat.

Another splash, then another. Finally, the worst sound of all . . . a snaking, sliding sound like something thick and wet brushing against the steel bulkhead.

And Gosling thought: *It doesn't know exactly where we are. . . it's casting for us like a hound for a scent . . .*

Morse started back. Coming fast. He held his gaff tightly in his hands, was ready to use it as the sounds came from just behind him. There was a look of abject terror on his face and if he had something to say, his lips were pressed so tightly even a breath couldn't get out. Gosling turned and made for the ladder, splashing wildly forward, afraid he would go on his ass. But he made that ladder and started going up it.

There were more sounds in the water now.

Morse just said, *"Climb! For the love of Christ, climb!"*

It seemed to take a long time to fight his way up the ladder. The waders he wore were wet and heavy, the boots slipping on the ladder rungs, his hands gripping tightly. He had dropped his gaff and did not remember doing so. All he could remember as he reached up for the light, for Marx's outstretched hands, was catching a quick glimpse of something as Morse started splashing toward him. A strange, convoluting form moving just behind the captain. Whatever it was, it was big. Very big.

When he was up, both he and Marx yanked Morse up through the manway and the three of them sat on the deck, not saying a word. Morse and Gosling were panting and thinking things and not honestly knowing if they'd overreacted or not. But were pretty sure they hadn't.

Morse wiped water from his face. "Put that fucking hatch back on," he said and it

was not a suggestion.

Gosling helped the engineer put it in place.

Marx grabbed a bolt and was about to screw it in, but then he stopped. “What . . . what in the hell?” he said.

By then they were all looking.

Looking at what they assumed — and correctly — to be Stokes’ work jacket. It was laying on the steel deck not four feet away, rank-smelling water draining from it in little streams. What caught their eye was that the jacket was *moving.*

Or something in it was.

Marx stood up, grabbed his own gaff, said, “Something inside there . . . you see that? There’s something inside there . . .”

Gosling just stared. Not scared or even nervous at this new revelation, just oddly amused. Thinking that there was a fish or something in there and it was nothing to worry about.

Marx hooked a sleeve with his gaff and lifted the coat up a few feet.

Water rained from it to the deck. Water that just smelled foul. Too foul for even ballast water. This was worse . . . it was rich and organic and almost gamy. Marx shook the coat and it moved again. Inside, maybe from a sleeve or the lining itself, there was something. Something white and fat and coiling, hanging on like a leech.

Marx shook the coat and it dropped to the deck.

It was bleached, bloated white, oozing with slime. Some sort of marine worm about the thickness of a garden hose and not more than a foot in length. It was winding and curling on the deck, trembling fatly, making slopping, slapping sounds. The outer layer of its flesh was nearly transparent and you could see a tracery of blue veins in there . . . but not for long. As it coiled, more of that slime bubbled forth, inundating it in a pool of mucus.

They all saw it.

They all stared dumbly at it, repulsed by its form, by its very existence.

Morse took his gaff and smashed it, cutting it in half. A gout of brown fluid spilled to the deck, looking much like spider blood and stinking like a corpse pulled from a river. It made a wet, gulping sound and on one of its ends, something like a puckered, black mouth opened and they could all see something in there . . . something like a tongue. And then Morse kept smashing it with his gaff hook until it was in five or six pieces and still, floating in a bile of that slimy jelly and brown blood.

Morse was breathing hard, sweat beaded on his brow. “Ain’t right,” he said. “Ain’t right, something like that.”

And all Gosling could think was that it had been in the coat all the time. Hiding in a sleeve or fold. Standing on the ladder, he’d used the gaff to hold it high above his head until Marx hooked it. And at any time, that horror could have dropped down onto his face.

Gosling would have been disgusted, but there was no time.

For something hit the service hatch from below and then hit it again and all he could think of was those bolts laying on the deck, the bolts Marx hadn’t had time yet to screw into the hatch flange. Something hit against it from below and Marx grabbed a bolt, dove on the hatch cover and managed to start a bolt and then the hatch exploded open and

both he and the hatch were pitched aside.

What came slithering out of there was not the thickness of a garden hose, but probably big around as a man's thigh. A worm. But the mother of all marine worms, something mottled gray above and dripping white below, loops of transparent slime hanging from the puckered black mouth like drool.

Marx made a sound and Gosling didn't have the wind to.

"Oh my God," Morse said under his breath.

About four feet of it came up through the hatch. It was wet and slimy and stinking, undulating repulsively under the electric lights. Its black, puckered mouth shriveled away from what was inside. A tongue. A tongue that was shaped like a corkscrew, something designed to drill into its victim's flesh. Like an abyssal hagfish, a slime eel, this monstrosity — like the dead one on the deck — would bore into its victim's flesh and devour it from the inside out.

At least this is what crossed through Gosling's mind and he was pretty certain it was close to the truth.

It was moving side to side like a swimming snake, making a hissing sound, that hideous pink tongue jutting from the mouth maybe five or six inches. It was obscene. It was invidious. Morse hit it with his gaff and it made a high, keening sound. He kept hitting it and it reacted by inflating its body like a balloon, rivers of that vile slime pouring from its flesh, tangling it in a snotty web.

All Morse had done was piss it off.

Another two feet of the thing came up through the manway and it was puffed and swollen so thickly in defense mode, that it was big around now as a man's waist.

Gosling grabbed a wrench and pegged the thing at what he thought might be its head.

Morse kept ducking in and swatting it with his gaff.

But Marx was way ahead of them. He ran off and came back with a CO^2 fire extinguisher. He pulled the tab and hosed the worm down with a freezing mist of white. The effect was immediate. The creature had inflated itself probably as a defensive mechanism and now it shrank back to its original size, spiraling and looping on the deck, trying to throw off the spray from the extinguisher that was sucking away its body heat.

"Here, have some more, you sonofabitch," Marx said, spraying the thing down until you couldn't even see it anymore. Just that white, rolling mist and all the slime the worm was pouring out. With a shrill, deafening squeal, it slipped back through the manway and they all heard it splash below.

Nobody needed prompting.

They threw the hatch cover in place and started turning those bolts into the flange until they could turn them no more. All the while, gagging on the cloud of CO^2 and the stench of the beast. Coughing, Marx put the ratchet on the bolts and locked the cover in place.

There were no more sounds from below.

Everyone was panting and gasping, just beside themselves with a combination of horror and nausea and bunched nerves.

When Morse found his breath, he said, "Seal off those outlets below, Chief. And . . . drain that goddamn tank. Flood it with bleach or bug spray or anything you fucking

got.”

Under the circumstances, it made perfect sense.

21

"Hey, Paul."

Gosling heard his name spoken and nearly jumped. Lots of things made him jump now. But it was just George Ryan, out taking a walk or something. He was leaning up in the corridor outside the crew's mess smoking a cigarette.

"Are you doing a little detective work?"

Gosling cleared his throat of whatever had been stuck in it. "No. Why the hell would I be doing something like that?" he said a little more sternly than he intended.

"Why wouldn't you? You're just as curious as the rest of us, aren't you?"

"There's nothing to be curious about."

George ran thin fingers through his matted beard. He dragged slowly off his cigarette. "Isn't there?"

"No, there isn't."

Christ, this was the last thing Gosling needed right now. It hadn't even been an hour yet since they danced the nasty with that fucking worm and he was beginning to wonder if it had happened at all. Morse was up in his cabin, trying to figure out their next move. Gosling himself had taken a hot shower and still he could smell that thing on him . . . that sharp stink of carrion. What he didn't need right now was George Ryan reading his mind.

George laughed. "No, I guess getting lost in some weird fog and having a deckhand go crazy is par for the course at sea. I gotta get out more."

"Jesus bloody Christ, George. I thought you were smarter than that. I was starting to think that you and Cushing were the only ones with brains on this goddamn ship. I guess I was wrong."

George was smiling. "Save it," he said. "Save it for Saks and those other idiots, okay? All the dumb swabbies who'll swallow anything you guys tell 'em. I know better"

"And what is it you know?"

"I know you guys are clueless. You don't know what's going on here or where we are or how we're going to get out of any of this. And I also know there's a lot more to that bit with that deckhand than any of you guys want to let on about. Why don't you just admit it?"

Gosling just stood there, feeling completely defenseless. There were a lot of things he could have said. Countless lies he could have manufactured. But it would have all been pointless. George had him and he knew it.

"You want me to tell you we're lost in the Bermuda fucking Triangle, George? You want that?"

"If it's the truth"

"Well, it's not, so if you don't mind, I got work to do," he said, walking away and leaving George standing there, that amused little grin on his face. Sonofabitch was just too damn smart for his own good.

Gosling made his way topside and coming up that companionway, he started to get a bad feeling. There was no real reason for it. But, regardless, it descended on him and filled him with a bitter sense of hopelessness, an anxiety that left him feeling utterly

helpless. He paused there, leaning up against the bulkhead, and he honestly didn't have the strength to face any of it. Things had already happened that were beyond anything rational and they would keep happening. Keep happening, he figured, until he was drained dry, without an ounce of fight left in him. And that was really the problem, wasn't it? Gosling was a handson sort of guy. Very blue-collar, very working class. He was not the imaginative sort. His world was very black and white, the perimeters very well-defined. He asked very little of reality other than for it to always be the same.

And now this.

It was just too goddamn much.

He started up the steps again, telling himself in no uncertain terms to suck it in. He was the First and that meant people looked to him. Looked to him for strength and stability. Sometimes, when the going got rough, the First was the only thing standing between chaos and calm.

Gosling came out of the hatch into that boiling fog and right away, he knew there was trouble. Just as something in him had suspected. Somebody was hollering, crying out frantically.

"Now fucking what?" Gosling said under his breath.

It was coming from somewhere in front of the superstructure, somewhere out on the bow. Gosling made his way forward, that fog thicker than pillow down. He could hear one of the men shouting about something and then the sound of feet running in his direction. The fog whistle sounded, as it did every few minutes, but this time it made him jump.

One of the deckhands — Pollard — came bounding out of that soup, his eyes wide and wet and his mouth trying to form words.

Gosling took hold of him and slammed him up against the bulkhead. "What in the Christ are you yelling about?" he snapped at him.

"It . . . it was . . . I saw . . . oh Jesus, Mr. Gosling, he was right there and then he was gone and I saw it! I fucking saw it!" He was blabbering on and not making a lick of sense so Gosling shook him like a rag doll. Things like this he could handle. Men out of control, men about to shit their drawers because the sea had kicked their legs out from under them. "There was . . . there was . . . shit, I was out on the bow and Burky, you know Burky, First . . . well he was on watch, out on the bow and something got him! Just fucking *grabbed* him! He was four feet from me and I saw it, I saw something come out of the fog, First!" He slid down the bulkhead, making a pained, sobbing sound. He couldn't seem to catch his breath. *"It came out of the fog and grabbed Burky! Pulled him away and there wasn't anything I could do!"*

Gosling pulled him to his feet. "All right, take it easy. Take a deep breath. I think you're hyperventilating, by Christ."

Pollard was just a kid. This was his second run on the *Mara Corday.* He'd spent a couple years in the Coast Guard and signed on as a deckhand, wanted nothing better than to get his mate's ticket. He chewed his lips, pulling air hard through his nose.

"Now what did you see?" Gosling put to him.

"Something . . ." He shook his head. "Something came out of the fog . . . I saw a dark blur . . . and, damn, it was big, whatever it was it was real big." He looked at Gosling, maybe to see if the first mate and his superior was going to laugh dead in his

face. But Gosling was not laughing; he was just staring. “It just grabbed him, First, grabbed him real quick . . . I think, I think it had wings . . . big, black wings . . . and it just yanked Burky off his feet and pulled him off the deck and out into the fog.”

Gosling gave his shoulder a squeeze. “Listen to me now. I want you to go below to your cabin and I want you to lay down. That’s an order.”

“But I got watch,” he said. “I was going to replace Burky.”

“You let me worry about the watch. Just go below and take it easy and don’t go telling anybody about this. We don’t need a general panic here.”

Pollard nodded. “Okay, okay I will. But . . . what’s with this fog, First? What the hell gives here?”

Gosling just sent him below. He stood there, watching that awful fog billow and surge. It was bad. By God, it was real bad. But Gosling was almost glad it *was* there, hiding things, masking others. For if it cleared, he was almost afraid of what they might see out there.

And what might see them.

22

Iverson was at the wheel, steering the freighter through the fog, and Gosling was at the chart table making computations the old fashioned way. With a pencil and quadrant laid over a chart of their last confirmed position, he had plotted their course . . . he hoped. But without working compasses, LORAN, GPS, or even a plain old star to pinpoint their position, they were sailing blind and he knew it.

He was just going through the motions.

But, honestly, he didn't know what else to do.

"Come left to one-twenty-three," he told Iverson.

"Aye, sir, one-twenty-three and holding."

"Rudder amidships and keep her so," Gosling said. He scribbled a few figures on the chart. "Mark your head."

"One-twenty-three, sir, steady on"

Gosling sighed, staring down at the chart. In the old days with a good compass and a few stars, it was all you needed. Gosling was a good navigator and he had complete faith in his ability to navigate the old-fashioned way. But out here, out in this damnable sea on the far side of the Devil's asshole, all he was doing was making wild, desperate guesses. He was changing their heading just about every hour on the hour, hoping they'd sail clear of that damn fog.

But it wasn't happening and he had a nasty feeling it never would.

"Sir . . . the radar," Iverson said, a note of panic in his voice.

But Gosling was already on his feet, the alarm of the collision-avoidance radar pulling him from his daydreaming. He stood before the console. What he was seeing nearly filled the screen and the *Mara Corday* was on a collision course with it. Something, according to the radar, that was about the size of a football field.

"Right hard rudder!" he called out.

Iverson spun the wheel and the ship canted to starboard. Everybody on board was feeling it now, that sudden drastic shift. Gosling was staring intently at the radar screen. Whatever was out there, it wasn't a ship. It was big as one, but it was just too low in the water. The *Mara Corday* missed it by a matter of feet. As whatever in the hell it was swung past the freighter's port side, it vanished from radar . . . then reappeared, only it wasn't a single immense object, but a school of smaller blips each about the size of a station wagon, according to the screen. As it or *they* passed, they vanished from radar again and did not come back.

Gosling felt something in him drop. It had been close. Damn close. He exhaled, wiped a dew of sweat from his face. "Come left to one-twenty-three," he said.

"Aye, one-twenty-three," Iverson repeated. He was breathing hard himself. "What in the fuck was that?"

"Hell if I know. Whatever it was, we almost hit it." Gosling sank into his chair at the chart table. "I thought . . . I thought maybe it was an overturned hull riding that low . . . then it broke up into something like a pod of goddamn whales. You log it."

The door at the rear of the pilothouse opened and Morse appeared. He did not look happy. "What in the hell's going on, Mister?"

“We came over hard,” Gosling told him. “Something . . . something bearing down on us.”

“What?”

The question was addressed to Gosling, but Iverson couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Ghosts, sir,” he said, tittering under his breath. “Just ghosts.”

23

The captain's Christian name was Arlen Morse.

The sea was in his blood and always had been. When other boys had wanted to be Major League ball players or pilots or locomotive engineers, Morse had only wanted to be a sailor. He wanted to be ship's master and have a craft of his own. Something big, something powerful, something important. In his twenty years in the Navy he'd helmed destroyers, tankers, minesweepers, patrol boats, light cruisers, and even tugs. It was his life and he wanted no other.

Then one day the Navy soured for him. He'd been a petty officer. Then, through ROTC, had made ensign. He climbed through the ranks to captain almost effortlessly. He did what he was told and in the way he was told to do it. There were only two types of men in any navy — those who followed orders and went by the book and those that didn't. And those that didn't went nowhere.

Morse played the game by the rules.

And in the end, the rules turned on him.

He had command of his own ship but that was it. Because he was not an Annapolis graduate he would never go beyond where he already was. His career was over. And this is why he left the Navy. Took his retirement at twenty years and went into the commercial service. He had no regrets. Life had been good to him.

Then came this voyage.

Like any other sailor, he'd heard stories and yarns from day one. Some sailors, it seemed, were more afraid of the water than kids were of dark closets. They made up stories. Missing ships were snatched by malefic forces or gobbled up by sea monsters. Howling winds were the moaning, disembodied voices of the drowned dead. Odd patches of mist were ghost ships. Stories of spooks and monsters and haunted seas were numerous.

Every sailor had a story.

But they were just that.

Stories.

But now Morse was really beginning to wonder.

24

The next bad thing happened toward morning.

The night seeped by like tar, slow and drawn-out, just as black and enveloping. Every man on board wanted daylight, hoping, praying maybe that it would burn off the fog and bring the world back to them. For everyone, even the ones who had not witnessed any of the true madness with their own eyes, was certain that they were lost now, lost in some terrifying plane of madness. Maybe it was the stories circulating like colds bugs, tall tales certainly no worse than the raw, unflinching reality of the situation. And maybe it was just something every man felt right down to his marrow, a sense that Hell had unzipped beneath them and swallowed them whole.

So the night moved toward day.

According to the ship's digital chronometer, it was just after four a.m. when the shit duly landed and sprayed in every conceivable direction. Gosling, unable to sleep, unable to close his eyes without seeing immense mutant sea worms, was in the pilothouse. Pierce was at the wheel. At the chart table Gosling was drifting off, his eyes finally closing.

Then Pierce started shouting, spinning the wheel and moving the rudder hard to the right. About that time, the deckhand out on watch was on the intercom: *"Barge. . . bearing down on us! We're gonna collide! Hard over! Hard over! She's running with no fucking lights on, no fucking lights. . ."*

All of this happened within the span of a few seconds and by then Gosling was on his feet. He saw the mystery barge on the radar screen. Managed to see it, open his mouth . . . and then the barge slammed into the *Mara Corday's* bow, port side, and he was thrown to the deck. The barge was a thousand-footer and carried enough iron and weight on her to cut a liner in two. She struck the *Mara Corday* doing 14 knots, shearing open the freighter's stem, her own bow slicing into the forward cargo hold . . . the special double-hulled dangerous cargo hold which contained nearly 100 tons of hi-speed diesel fuel bound for French Guiana. Over two hundred barrels were shattered, their contents flooding the hold. Within seconds, the *Mara Corday* began settling to port. The barge, still under full thrust from its twin-screws, tore itself free from the freighter, swinging around and ramming her amidships with its stern. Immediately, millions of gallons of water flooded into the port holds. The list to port grew worse.

The initial impact had compromised the integrity of the superstructure, port-side decks collapsing beneath it. There was a screech of torn metal and the pilothouse yawned over a few feet, the windows shattering, the decks buckling.

Picking himself up, Gosling saw Pierce was down, his face covered with blood. Morse came stumbling through the door that led down to his private office.

All Gosling could say was: "Skipper . . . we got jeopardy . . ."

25

George Ryan came awake when he hit the floor.

In his ears, there was a phone ringing and ringing.

He opened his eyes slowly, wondering vaguely in the back of his mind who could possibly be calling at this time of night and what the hell he was doing on the floor. Then he came fully awake and felt the heave of the ship and realized where he was. The second thing he realized was that something was wrong. Dangerously wrong.

He could hear men shouting above the damned ringing.

Cushing was shaking Soltz. "Wake up, dammit!" he was shouting. "Fire! There's a fire on board!"

George was on his feet then, mechanically pulling on his boots and pants and sweater. He slid his slicker on over this and finally sleep was slapped from his brain and reality insinuated.

"What? What's going on?" Soltz said.

"Fire," Cushing said as calmly as possible. But his voice wavered, trembled with anything but calm. "Fire . . . I think we're on fire . . . we hit something . . ."

But by then, they could already feel the uncomfortable list to port. Smell something like smoke.

"What happened?" George asked.

"Hell if I know," Cushing admitted. "I came awake hanging out of my fucking bunk, hearing that goddamn alarm. I heard someone shouting fire. We better get on deck."

Soltz moved quickly then. Much quicker than either man could've imagined he'd move. By the time they'd gathered themselves together, Soltz was fully dressed and had his suitcase in hand.

"Jesus, nobody said we were sinking," George said.

"I'm not leaving this behind. All my things are in here."

Saks was barreling up the corridor as they went out. He looked angry. Maybe frightened, too, but probably just angry that he *was* frightened. He was carrying a heap of life jackets. "Put these on," he said, throwing the life vests to the floor.

"Is it that bad?" Cushing asked.

"Come on, you dumb shits," he snapped, "unless you wanna be toast."

George looked up in the rafters, the survival suits hanging there. They could keep a man afloat and warm for days, it was claimed. "The suits . . ."

"Fuck the suits," Saks said. "Now move!"

The corridor was filling with smoke. It was more of a mist than anything, but it was getting heavier by the moment. The air had an awful scorched, acrid stink to it.

They followed Saks up to the deck, donning the vests as they went.

"What happened?" Cushing asked.

"Are we sinking?" Soltz wanted to know. "Are the lifeboats ready?"

"Barge slammed into us, slammed into us *hard.* We're taking on water," Saks said. "Fucking barge tore into the forward hold, lit up that diesel fuel in there. Amidships and forward hold are an inferno. The rest of those drums go and . . ."

He didn’t need to say more. They could pretty much envision what it would be like sitting on a stick of dynamite.

The first explosion rang out when they reached deck.

26

Fabrini felt the explosion before he actually heard it. He and Menhaus were standing by one of the graders, lost in the ever-present fog. The impact threw them face first to the deck. They heard the muffled, mushrooming roar while they were airborne, followed by the sound of shattering glass and men screaming.

And while all of that was bad, the worst thing was the ship itself. It shuddered with a heavy, crawling roll, seeming to shift alarmingly further port without righting itself, flinging men across the decks like jackstraw.

"This can't be happening," Menhaus kept saying as he pulled himself to his feet, wiped blood from his lips, and was spilled to the deck again by the violent heaving motion of the ship.

"Oh, it's happening," Fabrini said. "It's happening just like I fucking knew it would."

Containers stacked amidships had been reduced to shrapnel as the hatch covers beneath them were blown free, gouts of flame raining over the spar deck. It lit things up just fine. Encased in the luminous fog, the flames reflecting against it . . . the ship looked like something that had burst the gates of Hell.

Saks came charging forward, moving with an almost feline grace despite the jerking decks. "Give a hand with the lifeboats, you pussies," he called out. "To the boat deck, move your asses! Come on, Fabrini, you fucking wop, move it!"

Menhaus grabbed his arm as he rushed by. "Saks? It isn't happening, is it? Tell me it's not happening! I got a wife . . . I don't wanna die out there! I don't wanna die!"

Saks shoved him to the deck. "Listen, you fucking baby! Your mommy's titty ain't nowhere in sight, so quit acting like a shit and lend a hand or so help me I'll-"

There was a high pitched metallic groaning from below and the decks trembled, dropping Saks on top of Menhaus. He crawled free.

"Move it! *Move it!"* he shouted. "Fabrini, you fucking cock mite, what the hell are you standing around about? Lend a hand, goddamn you!"

The decks were mass confusion as crewmen and mates rushed about in the swirling mist, calling out orders, clearing debris, and desperately stripping tarps from lifeboats.

The ship continued to drift with a jolting, uneasy motion, leaning further and further port as the fire raged and the sea rushed in.

27

Gosling jogged across the lurching decks, climbing the see-sawing ladders to the pilothouse. The air was thick and pungent with belching black smoke and the stink of charred wood.

He saw the deck lights flicker in that cloistral fog.

Go out.

The ship was plunged into seething blackness. Men started to scream again and he wondered if they'd ever stopped. The world was a hive of noise. Timbers crunching, metal creaking and groaning with fatigue. Voices were calling for help. Voices were arguing. Grown men were shrieking like babes and he wanted very much to join in.

Then the lights came back on, flickered with a dim strobe effect, but finally caught.

As he entered the pilothouse, or was thrown into it, he saw Morse at the radio. He was shouting into it. "MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!" he bellered. "THIS IS AN SOS! THIS IS AN SOS! WE'RE SINKING . . . OUR POSITION . . ." he tossed the mic against the bulkhead. The lights kept flickering. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! We don't have any goddamn juice!"

Gosling grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. "Captain, we have to get off her," he stammered. "The sea's coming in too fast for the pumps . . . if the rest of those drums go-"

"I've seen the Fourth of July, Mister, I know what'll happen. Let's get off this bitch. Lower those boats."

Gosling had already given that order, just as he'd given the order for the men to don their survival suits just as they'd been trained to do . . . but in the confusion and panic with the ship yawing and rolling severely, well, he figured most never heard.

"Let's go, First," the captain said.

He took the lead, Gosling at his heels, making for the hatch . . . but never got there.

A tremendous ear-shattering roar ripped the night into shreds. The deck beneath them heaved and buckled. The pilothouse collapsed in a rain of splintered wood, glass, and twisted metal.

Gosling crawled from the wreckage, bleeding from a dozen gashes in his face. He found what was left of Morse: he'd been split in two by a beam.

It happened that quick.

Gosling made it out to the ladder, started climbing down the superstructure, deck by deck. The fog had thinned now, it seemed, been replaced by funneling black smoke. He almost made the spar deck when another explosion tossed him through the air. Girders and flaming sheet metal collapsed on top of him.

He tried to pull himself free, but his foot snagged.

"Help!" he called out. "Over here! Lend a hand!"

28

George, Soltz, and Cushing were gripping the portside handrail for dear life as they'd been instructed by one of the mates when the latest series of explosions barked in the night. They were thrown to the deck, but they all saw what happened.

And what a sight it was.

The explosions hit with more force than the previous ones. Like cannon shots. *Whomp! Whomp! Whomp!* The decks reeled and buckled with a cacophonous screech of tormented metal, splitting open with great jagged rents that emitted eruptions of boiling flames. George saw the hatch cover over the starboard cargo bay actually *bulge* momentarily like a balloon suddenly filled with air before bursting its latches with a thundering boom and shooting into the sky like a rocket. Great rolling clouds of mushrooming fire and black greasy smoke poured into the sky, mixing with that noxious fog into a seething storm of fumes that sucked the oxygen from the air.

"Oh my God, Oh my God, Oh my God," Soltz whimpered.

George held on to him and Cushing, almost afraid to let go. Flames licked over the decks now, engulfing everything in their path. Lifeboats went up like kindling. Men were blazing like torches. The big dozers were shrouded in fire. George saw four or five men dive off the writhing decks, stick matches consuming themselves.

The deck lights went out for good now.

They were no longer needed. The ship had become a flickering funeral pyre of orange and yellow billowing light, backlit by the mist.

There were flashes of purple and red light, more detonations from below, more flames, more dying and screams of agony. The air was reeking with a hot, raw stink of seared flesh and crackling thunderstorms.

"Come on!" George screamed over the jarring racket. "We gotta get off her before she goes!"

They got unsteadily to their feet as the ship lurched further and further to port, the mangled decks dipping down to the water line. There was a sudden awful blaring noise of screeching metal as both of the dozers snapped their moorings and slid across the decks, taking howling, crushed men with them as they burst through the railing and into the black waters below. Huge fireballs cascaded into the night.

George and the others ran towards the bow, vaulting the injured and the dying as the ship heaved. Jagged fissures opened up before them, swallowing one of the graders and four men who'd been trying to toss a lifeboat over the side. Their screams split the air.

"Over the side!" George screamed. "Now!"

"I can't swim," Soltz blubbered. "I'm afraid to-"

George shoved him into the darkness and planted his foot on Cushing's backside. Both men careened to the waters below, vanishing into the fog. George took one last look around before doing the same. The ship was going down fast. It seemed he could almost feel it sinking. The decks and cabins were raging with fire now. He gripped the railing and made to jump.

But stopped.

Someone was calling for help.

Just go, goddamn you, a voice cried out in his head.

But he couldn't. This one voice seemed to rise up above everything else and he couldn't ignore it. He jogged through the smoke and pillars of fire. The voice was louder. It was coming from up near the superstructure . . . or the jagged pile of burning shrapnel it now was.

"Help me out of here," Gosling moaned. "For the love of God . . ."

His ankle was trapped between two timbers. George wrapped his hands around the upper one, the encroaching fire singing the hairs of his beard. With a great heave he budged it an inch, two inches, three. Gosling pulled his leg free.

They made it to the railing together.

"Over the side!" Gosling shrieked.

Another explosion rocketed through the night and both men were catapulted into the sea along with shards of steaming metal and burning wood. There was that dizzying moment of descent, lost in the fog and blackness, then the water. The sea was warmer than George anticipated. Warm and soupy, yet oddly refreshing after the heat of the ship. He plunged down into the waters, sinking and sinking, wondering why the lifejacket wasn't working, and then he surfaced, sucking in smoky, salty air. Something gripped his shoulder and he realized it was Gosling's hand.

"Swim!" he gasped. "Swim away from her!"

29

George followed in Gosling's wake, distancing himself from the ship, realizing the vacuum of it going down would probably pull him under if he didn't. The water was bobbing with wreckage. It was like swimming through an obstacle course. He heard voices crying out. Heard voices answering. At least they weren't alone in their plight. The sea was flat as a tabletop . . . but the water itself . . . odd. Not just warm, but turgid, thick . . . water but *not* water as George knew it. But there was no time for observations. He kept up with Gosling and soon the ship was a flaming silhouette in the distance.

"We're okay now," Gosling panted. "Far enough."

George watched the *Mara Corday* give up her ghost.

The fog was still a constant, but visibility had improved. The ship had listed now until its port gunwale practically touched the water. Then there was a booming rush of fountaining bubbles and she righted herself. For a second. The bow sank lower and lower, waves rushing up and over it. The stern rose up vertically like a jutting black finger and then she went down with an enormous hissing, leaving a sucking whirlpool in her wake. A few moments later, more cargo and flotsam bobbed to the surface.

Then there was only the cloisterous fog pressing in and that stillborn, tideless sea.

PART TWO

THE DRIFT

1

GEORGE'S FIRST IMPRESSION WAS that he and Gosling were alone out there.

His second impression was a feeling: panic.

Combined, these things made him want to scream and thrash like some little kid drowning in a bathtub. But slowly, slowly, he got it under control. He was with Gosling. Gosling was an experienced sailor . . . if anyone could keep him alive and get him to dry land, it would be the First Mate. That provided a certain sense of security. It wasn't exactly something you could wrap yourself up in and go to sleep with, but it was something.

They heard voices in the distance from time to time, but when they called out no one answered. There were a few bits of scattered light from burning objects still afloat, but one by one, they went out. And then all there was was that ever-present fog, thick and roiling. It still had that odd luminosity to it . . . like it was backlit by the glowing beam of some distant lighthouse. If nothing else, it provided scant illumination.

Just enough, George figured, to make everything look weird and surreal.

And creepy.

Because there was no other word to describe it. For that's exactly how it looked out there with that fog and the odd glow: creepy.

Sure, George was trying damn hard not to panic, but the bottom line here was that they were out in the middle of fucking nowhere without a lifeboat or a life raft and it was night and by dawn their life jackets would be saturated and they'd drown. That is if the sharks didn't get them first. His mind had already sketched that particular nightmare out in some detail. He kept remembering scenes from that movie where the big shark gobbles people up. He kept wondering what it would feel like when those teeth sank into him. Would it be a big goddamn shark that would swallow him whole or would it be a smaller monster that would maybe bite his leg off? He'd seen a show once where a shark did that to a shipwreck victim. It just kept coming around, taking bites and pieces.

Oh, Jesus.

This can't be fucking happening, he thought frantically. *This only happens to guys on the late movie. Shit like this doesn't come down on normal guys like me who run bulldozers for a living and are just trying to keep the creditors at bay-*

"HELP!" he started screaming. "IS ANYBODY OUT THERE? GODDAMN YOU ANSWER ME RIGHT NOW FOR THE LOVE OF CHRIST!"

There was no answer. Just that brooding silence. And that odd sort of humming he could hear from time to time.

"You feel better now?" Gosling said. "Good. Now knock it off for chrissake. We're not dead yet."

George kept treading water as if he didn't trust the lifejacket. "Oh, you're a real fucking comfort," he panted.

"Quit splashing around," Gosling told him. "Just lay back like me. The jacket'll float you. All the racket might attract interest"

"Sharks?"

"No," Gosling said. "That's not what I was thinking exactly."

And George honestly didn't have the balls to follow that one up. Not sharks? What, then?

"Don't panic. We'll be fine. But there's no sense in wasting energy treading water when you don't have to."

George swallowed and let himself float. It wasn't bad. It was almost relaxing just bobbing there.

"Are there really sharks out here?" he asked.

"Who can say? This is the ocean, George, lots of things call it home. It's a food chain like any other."

Shit. "Will they get us?"

"Not if I can help it." He must've sensed the panic in George's eyes. "All right, listen to me and listen good. There are two things that attract sharks. The first is doing what you were doing — splashing around. What you're doing when you do that is drawing attention to yourself. You're acting like a fish in distress. You're sending off the same signals. The second thing that attracts sharks is blood. They can smell it in the water. I've heard they can smell it for miles. So don't thrash around and don't bleed. Simple."

George started checking out every ache and pain in his body to see if he had any cuts. He didn't think so. "You didn't cut your leg back there, did you?"

"No, I just twisted it. Relax. Wait for the dawn. We'll be fine."

And that was easy for him to say, George thought dismally. Big, tough sailor-boy. But George was no sailor and after this little party he was moving to fucking Kansas. He never wanted to see open water again. He didn't think he'd ever even go swimming again. And if he did, there wouldn't be anything bigger than tadpoles in said water, thank you very much.

Which made him start remembering things. The panic . . . the fire and screaming and confusion . . . the ship going down . . . sure, it had all blotted out other things for awhile, darker thoughts about that awful fog and the stories circulating concerning it. You know, all that cute, amusing stuff about the Devil's Triangle and that sort of thing.

But now it was back.

Now it was digging down inside him and it had teeth.

He thought: *What if any of that crazy hoodoo bullshit is true? It's bad enough to abandon ship, but to abandon ship in some fucking crazy dead zone that chews up ships and men, swallows 'em alive and kicking. . .*

Jesus, it was all bad, wasn't it?

And not just that weird fog and all the rest, but even the sea itself. So calm, so warm. Unnaturally warm, it seemed. And its consistency just wasn't right. Not like water really, too oily, too thick, too something. Like it was full of suspended sediment, closer to gelatin than water. It left a slimy residue on the skin.

And it stank. Like something decomposing under a log.

George sucked in a sharp breath, tried to fight the fear, the uncertainty, tried to hold it all together which was not easy. Felt like his guts, his resolve was strung together out of thread and spit.

For now there was survival. Nothing more. He had to remember that.

“Do you think it’ll be long before we’re picked up?” George asked Gosling. And from the tone in his voice — a squeaky, breathless tone — he realized he sounded like some little kid that needed reassuring that there were indeed no monsters in the closet or under the bed.

“Depends” Gosling’s voice was practically a whisper. There was something very guarded about it.

“On what?”

“On a lot of things,” he said. “If the current pushes us out of the shipping lanes, it could be awhile. If it doesn’t, I would say a boat’ll be by any time. Probably in the morning or afternoon. Hopefully. If not, well, we’ll be reported overdue in Cayenne tomorrow night . . . or tonight actually.”

What George was hearing in his voice he did not like at all. It sounded like Gosling was reading from a script, like he didn’t believe a goddamn word of what he was saying. If there was an undercurrent there, it was saying, *sure, George, they’ll be looking for us. Same way they look for lots of ships that vanish without a trace . . .*

“How long will these jackets float us?”

“Long enough. Maybe.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry. First light we’ll have a look around, see what we can find. Should be lots of junk floating around. Usually is.”

George could see his silhouette in the murky light, figured he was lying his ass off about a lot of things. And maybe it wasn’t that exactly, but it was something. So George decided to bait him a bit: “Shouldn’t somebody be here by now? A rescue ship? A plane? A helicopter?”

“Why?”

“Because of the distress signal.”

Gosling exhaled sharply. “I think they might have a little trouble finding us. Being where we are.”

“Which is?”

But Gosling would not answer him. And that seemed to be the worst thing of all.

2

"You know something, Fabrini," Saks said. "If they ever come out with an asshole of the year award, I'm putting you up for it."

Fabrini gave him the finger even though it was invisible in the semi-darkness.

"You think anyone else made it?" Menhaus asked.

"Course they did," was all Saks would say.

"Yeah, well don't hold your breath," Fabrini said sourly.

"Shut your hole, shit-fer-brains. I told you, I told the both of you to get to the freaking lifeboats. But did you?" Saks slapped his palm into the water. "No, you two ass guppies sat there clinging to each other like you were queer for each other. So you swapped some spit and fell in love and this is where it got us."

"Fuck you," Fabrini mumbled.

The three of them were clinging to a large wooden crate. In addition to their lifejackets, they were safe for the time being. Saks had found the two of them dog-paddling through the surf like confused puppies. With his usual grace he'd directed them away from the boat. Until Menhaus bumped his nose into the crate. Then the trouble started. Both Fabrini and Menhaus did their best to clamor onto it. No dice. The crate spun in the water. They started screaming and hollering, fighting each other to get on top — so much for their pledge of watching each other's behinds. Saks had to intervene and explain to them just what sort of mud-bathing, shit-eating farmyard critters their mothers had had sex with to give birth to a couple of candy-assed losers like them. After a good five minutes of abuse, they calmed down. They clung to different sides of the crate. In this way, they could float peacefully and safely.

Menhaus was watching the fog, knowing there was something damn funny about it, but not wanting to point it out to the others. Hoping, maybe, that it was just his imagination. Nothing more.

"No, Menhaus," Saks went on, "I just don't know what you see in Fabrini. What makes you wanna tongue him all night is beyond me. He's hung like a pencil stub and dumber than a box of stale rat shit. I don't get it."

Menhaus forced a chuckle.

"We get out of this, fuckface," Fabrini ranted, "and me and you are going to have business. You know what I'm saying, asshole?"

"Yeah, I know what you're saying, you little ass jockey," Saks said in disgust. "And you should see me. I'm just blushing over here. I've never had my dick sucked by a wop before."

"You fuck," Fabrini grumbled. "You suck. I'll kill you." He lost his grip and slid back into the water. The crate bobbed wildly. He fought to get a hold, but kept slipping and slipping. Panicking now, he began thrashing wildly in the water. Finally his fingertips caught a seam and he hoisted himself up.

"Shit," he panted. "Jesus."

"Quit fooling around, turd brain," Saks snapped.

"Both of you quit," Menhaus said flatly. "I'm sick of listening to you. For God's sake we're not in the poolroom here, we're out in the middle of the ocean and I for one

don't wanna drown because you two are acting like a couple brats."

"Shit," Fabrini said.

"He's right, Fagbrini," Saks murmured. "Let's just take it easy here. Save our strength. We might need it. I know you two'll need all the strength you can muster once you get on dry land and start raping each other."

"Goddammit, Saks," Menhaus said.

"Sorry. I just never thought I'd be stuck in the middle of the goddamn ocean with a couple guys like you. Jesus H. Christ."

"Shut up, Saks," Fabrini said, sounding tired, finished.

"Yeah, I'll shut up. I think we all should shut up. Do us some good. Especially Fagbrini here. We wouldn't be in this mess if it wasn't for him stroking your salami, Menhaus, instead of seeing to the boat."

"Fuck you and your father," Fabrini said.

"My father? Shit, least he taught me how to follow instructions. Yer old man was too busy screwing the neighbor's poodle to teach you any sense."

Menhaus rested his face against the cool damp of the crate, wishing, praying for rescue. Anything. Right now, even sharks sounded better than listening to these two picking at each other.

Jesus, had to be another ship out here.

Didn't there?

But Menhaus wasn't so sure. In fact, you came right down to it, he wasn't sure about a lot of things. Where they were. That damn fog. That funny smell. None of it seemed right. He couldn't put a finger on it exactly, but something in his guts was telling him this was all terribly wrong, that being shipwrecked was the least of their problems.

"I wonder where the hell we are?" Fabrini said under his breath, but they heard him, all right.

Saks grumbled something and Menhaus didn't say a word. Was almost afraid to. Because, like the *Mara Corday* herself, he simply could not find his center. His compass was spinning wildly.

"Somewhere in the Atlantic, I guess," Menhaus found himself saying, hoping that was true.

But Fabrini just grunted. "You think so? You really think so?"

Menhaus was waiting for Saks to say something smart-assed, something crude and insulting, but humorous. Something that would defuse that awful, biting tension. But he didn't say a thing and Menhaus felt something inside him clench just a little tighter. He stared off into that milky, shimmering mist and was seeing it now as something completely unnatural, something alive and aware and hungry.

It eats people alive, a voice in his head was telling him, echoing up from some dark, lonely place like the bottom of a well. *It sucks down ships and tosses people into this godawful soup and then slowly, patiently, it devours them.*

But that was just nerves talking. Nerves hot-wired by stress and anxiety and fear of the unknown. And Menhaus was not going to listen to them. He was going to be as tough as the other two, take it all with a grin or a smirk.

Yeah, right.

Bobbing there at the crate, he stuck his hand into the water, knowing just as

George Ryan knew that there was something damn funny about it.

"What the hell are you doing, Menhaus?" Saks wanted to know. "You're not drinking that stuff, are you?"

Menhaus assured him he wasn't. "It feels funny, doesn't it? The water? Thick or something?"

"It's like Jello right before it sets," Fabrini said. "Goddamn soup."

"Just oil from the ship. That's all it is," Saks put in.

And it sounded pretty good. Problem was, nobody was buying such a pat explanation and you could hardly blame them. Because it wasn't just the water here, but everything. Everything was off in this place, everything was missing the mark somehow . . . not feeling exactly like it should and there was just no way to account for it.

"It ain't oil, Saks," Fabrini said. "Jesus . . . feel this stuff . . . it's like slime, it's heavy, swampy, I don't know what."

And as they argued back forth about it-they would argue pretty much about anything-Menhaus started getting some ideas, but he wasn't about to voice them. Wasn't about to say that, yes, it was slimy and not only that but salty and tepid and thick like watered-down gelatin. And that if he had to say what it reminded him of, he would have said amniotic fluid. A warm, vaporous bath of organic broth, seething and simmering like they were floating in the world's largest placenta. Because he remembered reading once, back in high school, that placental fluid was chemically very close to the composition of earth's primordial oceans. An organic flux of potential.

"This isn't worth arguing about," he finally said, sick of listening to the both of them.

Fabrini snorted. "Who's arguing?"

"Shut up," Saks said. "Both of you. Listen . . . I hear something out there."

And that pretty much shut everyone down. They listened, feeling their own hearts beating, breath in their lungs. Because out there, out in that churning mist, they were expecting nothing good.

Menhaus heard it right away and was surprised he hadn't before: a distant thudding sound, like something was scraping harshly against something else. *Thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk.*

"Oars," Fabrini said. "Those are oars . . . somebody's rowing out there."

And he was right, they all suddenly realized.

For what they were hearing were the sound of oars rasping against oarlocks, creaking and groaning in the night. The sound began to get closer, though it was truly hard to say from what direction it was coming.

"Hey!" Fabrini cried out, certain rescue was coming. *"Hey! Over here!* We're over here!"

And then Saks was shouting, too, both of them calling out into the fog, their voices coming back at them with an eerie sibilance. Menhaus did not join them, for he did not like the sound of that rowing. It was too frantic, too hurried, too panicked-sounding.

It was not a gentle, searching rowing here, but the sound of escape.

But Saks and Fabrini did not seem to notice or want to and they kept at it . . . kept at it until a high, keening sort of scream came echoing out of the fog. It was shrill and hysterical, almost feminine or girlish in its wailing.

Nobody was saying anything then.

And out in the mist, there was more than one scream now. Men were howling and crying out and the sound of their voices were absolutely terrified. Menhaus and the others heard the timbre of those voices and it shut something down in them, pulled each man into himself. For whatever was happening to those unknown men in that unseen boat, it must have been horrible.

The screams were intermittent now.

"Somebody's in trouble," Fabrini said low in his throat. "Maybe we should paddle our crate over there, maybe we should . . . should do something."

And Saks said, quite calmly: "No, I don't think that would be a good idea at all."

And, for once, Fabrini did not disagree.

The three of them waited in the torpid water, listening and hearing and wanting dear God to be anywhere but where they were. Because they were locked down with terror now, three little boys hearing something dragging itself up the cellar stairs in the dead of night.

And maybe had it ended there with a big, fat mystery, they could have written it off. But it did not end. For they heard splashing and thudding sounds, men stumbling in a boat. Hollow, knocking sounds. Wet sounds. And then coming through it all, the tormented, insane voice of a man screaming, "Oh God oh God oh God help me help *somebody help me don't let it touch me don't touch me DON'T TOUCH ME-"*

And then it was cut off by a violent smashing sound like a steel girder had slammed into the boat out there. Menhaus felt something evaporate inside of him, maybe his blood and maybe his soul, and his skin went tight and his muscles bunched and compressed involuntarily as if they were trying to make his body smaller, less of a target. He had no spit in his mouth and no will to do anything but grip that crate harder.

For what came next was worse.

It sounded at first like something immense and fleshly had pulled itself up out of a swamp and then there was a low, bellowing snarl that reminded Menhaus of maybe a tiger roaring into a tunnel. It rose up, savage and guttural, echoing through the night. And then . . . then it was followed by tearing and rending noises, splattering sounds and a wet snapping. And finally, the chewing, grating sound like a dog gnawing on a steak bone.

Menhaus was breathing so hard he was nearly hyperventilating. He didn't mean to speak, but his voice came bubbling from his lips. "Make it stop, dear Christ, make it stop . . ."

And he felt Saks's hand gripping his arm like maybe he wanted to tear the limb free. "Quiet," he said sharply. "For the love of God, be quiet."

And out in the fog, there were a few more splashing and sliding sounds and then the night went quiet and dead and there was only the three of them.

Waiting.

Wondering when it would be their turn.

3

"I think it's a hatch cover," Cushing said, running his hands along the long rectangular object before them. It was thick and sturdy and seemed about large enough for six men.

"It won't sink?" Soltz said.

"No, not this. Hang on."

Cushing pulled himself up on it. It received his weight easily. He crawled over its wet, smooth surface. It was an overturned hatch cover, all right. Maybe the one that was blown off the starboard cargo hold, he figured.

"Help me up," Soltz said. "Please hurry."

Cushing grabbed him by his lifejacket and heaved him forward. After some frantic clawing, Soltz was onboard.

"We are the only survivors," Soltz said. "I know it now."

Cushing sighed. "No, we're not. We can't be."

"We might as well accept the inevitable, my friend," Soltz said, filled with sadness like a little boy who'd lost his puppy. "We are dead men. It's only a matter of how and when."

"Stop talking like that. Somebody'll pick us up after first light."

Soltz chuckled grimly. "Yes, yes, of course."

Cushing stared out into the nebulous mist, saying nothing. If Soltz was going to die, he only hoped it would be soon.

Soltz cradled his head in his hands "My sinuses are aching. This damp chill . . . I can't take it for long. I'll be dead of pneumonia long before any boat arrives" He started hacking, then sneezing. "It's this awful air . . . I can barely breathe it."

"We'll drift clear of it sooner or later," Cushing told him.

But Soltz didn't seem to believe that. "Why. . . why does it smell like this? Like something dead and gassy? That's not normal, is it? Well, is it? C'mon, Cushing, you know things like this . . . should air be smelling like that, even at sea?"

Cushing rubbed his eyes. Soltz. Jesus. The guy was a wreck under the best of circumstances, but this . . . well, it was even worse now. Of all the people to be shipwrecked with. But he did have a point there. That smell was not normal. It was stagnant, cloying like a malarial swamp in the armpit of the Amazon.

No, it wasn't right.

No more than any of this was right.

"Yeah, it smells funny, but don't worry about it. It's just the fog. When morning comes . . . well, it'll burn the fog off."

"Then what?"

Cushing just studied his shape in the dimness. "What do you mean?"

Soltz kept swallowing, like he was trying to keep his stomach down. "When the fog lifts . . . *what will we see out there?"*

4

The lifeboat was big enough for a dozen men.

Cook and the crewmen he'd found floating — Crycek and Hupp — were the only ones on board. Just the three of them with plenty of room to stretch out in that sixteen-foot orange fiberglass hull. Everything they needed to survive, including an inflatable canopy, was onboard. They had everything from burn cream to seasickness pills, fishing line to survival blankets, chocolate bars to purified water. The *Mara Corday's* emergency equipment was top-notch, well-maintained and updated before each voyage. It was the first mate's responsibility and Paul Gosling did not take it lightly. Yes, Cook knew, they had everything to survive, but they still had no idea where they were.

Basically, what they had was a roomy prison cell floating in the sea, at the whim of the elements and current or lack of the same. There was food. There was water. There were oars.

But there was no escape.

All dressed up, Cook thought, *and nowhere to go.*

"Christ," Crycek said. "When will this goddamn fog lift?"

Cook didn't bother answering that, because he was of the opinion that it might never lift. And if it did . . . well, no matter. He'd heard the stories the sailors had been telling before the ship went down. He was certain Crycek had heard them, too.

"Is he still unconscious?" Cook asked, looking over at Hupp.

"Yes," Crycek said. "I rather doubt he'll wake at all."

Hupp was the first assistant engineer and he was in a bad way. He was badly burned and banged-up from one of the explosions. Like Crycek, Cook's knowledge of medicine was strictly limited. He'd examined Hupp in the glow of a chemical lightstick, but that didn't tell him much. But judging from the fever boiling in his blood and the awful, hot stink wafting off of him,it looked very grim.

Cook had been the first to see the lifeboat. It had probably been blown clear of the ship's davits — along with its equipment during one of the final thundering detonations, Cook figured — and had managed to right itself in the flat seas. He found it within minutes after swimming clear of the ship. Sometime later, an hour or so, he'd found the two crewmen. Crycek was wearing a survival suit and Hupp just a lifejacket. Crycek had been holding onto Hupp, in order to keep his head out of the water. Said he found him floating like that, barely conscious.

So there they sat, waiting.

Thinking.

Worrying.

Cook could've asked for better companionship than Crycek. The man just sat there brooding in the gloom, clutching a lightstick and refusing to part with it. Much as he refused to part with his day-glo orange survival suit. Like he was expecting them to sink at any moment. But there was more to it than that, Cook knew, for Crycek had been one of the sailors that had manned the rescue boats when that crew member-Stokes, Cook remembered-had lost his mind and jumped overboard. He kept watching the fog like he was expecting something.

Now, Cook was quiet by nature. Not much of a conversationalist, but even when he tried, he couldn't get much out of Crycek about their search in the fog for Stokes. Crycek got real nervous when Cook brought it up just to pass the time.

And why was that?

All Crycek would say was, "The fog, there's funny things in the fog" And from the way he said it, you could tell real easy he wasn't alluding to clowns and dancing bears.

Which made Cook think about all those stories running through the ship, bits about the Devil's Triangle and things about Stokes being bloodied by something that drove him mad. And that other tidbit he'd gotten from one of the porters, something about the search team having some weird, spooky experiences out in the fog.

Cook didn't like it.

Didn't like a lot of this.

Among the equipment stowed on the boat were signaling devices and flares, a manual radio beacon and even a portable VHF radio. Cook had been sending out distress signals for what seemed hours now, calling out for help on the VHF.

So far, nothing but static.

And it was that very static that was bothering him. For it almost sounded at times as if there was something buried in it, a strange distant buzzing sound that came in short, irregular pulses. It rose up and faded away, it seemed, before his ears really got a chance to separate it from the background noise. But it was there, he was sure it was there.

Maybe it was nothing . . . yet, Cook didn't believe that. The few brief instances when he'd heard it, it had unsettled him for it did not seem random or undirected. And that should have been a good thing . . . but for some crazy reason he didn't think it was.

What? he asked himself. *What is it that bothers you about it so much? What you might be hearing could be just dead noise, atmospheric interference. . . or maybe the Coast Guard searching you out. Isn't that a good thing?*

He just wasn't sure.

For nothing was reading right here, from the fog to this soupy becalmed sea, and part of him was certain that if there was an intelligence behind that buzzing, then it was not benevolent in nature.

That was crazy, paranoid thinking, but there was something about the fog that encouraged such wild leaps of irrationality. The buzzing pulses or pings or whatever they were only occurred moments after Cook sent out a voice signal. Maybe that meant absolutely nothing . . . but what if somebody out there was locking onto those signals and was seeking them out?

This is the very thing that unnerved Cook, the very thing he dared not even admit to himself. Because he couldn't get one central idea out of his mind: whatever came out of the fog would not be a good thing.

Crycek had heard those sounds when he used the VHF, too. And when he did, he pulled the plug from his ear, said, "Fucking weird . . . that sound, you hear it? A buzzing. Like there's some locust out there wanting to talk."

And that's exactly what Cook had thought, what had gotten under his skin and stayed there: it did sound like a locust. Like some loathsome insect was trying to make contact.

Of course, if there was someone or *something* trying to find them, then all it would have to do is follow the emergency radio beacons the boat sent on auto.

You gotta stop it, Cook was telling himself, *and you gotta stop it right now.*

And he knew he had to. He was not nervous or high-strung by nature and that's why him feeling this way, thinking these dark things, was even more disturbing.

But he had to keep his head, because he had the feeling that Crycek was right on the edge. And one little push is all it would take.

Cook kept wondering about the others. Had any of the ship's crew made it? Had any of the construction crew? He found it hard to believe that even the sea could take Saks. It was silly to think of a man like that simply drowning. Maybe a bullet or a knife, but nothing so prosaic as drowning.

And the others?

Well, yes, he could picture the sea taking them.

But not Saks.

Saks was too much like Cook's father, the belligerent, opinionated sonofabitch who'd beaten his mother to death. Cook had watched it go on for years. Every Friday night his father finished his shift at the mill, sauced himself up on Jack Daniels, and came home walking ten-feet tall and bulletproof, just looking for a fight. And men like that, they always found one sooner or later. And if they couldn't find one, they created one.

Whether it was genetics or environment, Cook only knew that his father was trash. Asshole is as asshole does.

It was just not Cook's mother who took it, but Cook himself. Anybody who got in the way. Then the old man lost his job, decided drinking was a vocation, and the beatings became daily. In time, they became extremely vicious. His mother was in and out of the hospital. Broken ribs. Broken jaw. Sprained wrist. A punctured lung. Bruised kidney. And she always covered for the bastard. But she couldn't cover for him when he threw her down the stairs in a drunken rage and her neck snapped like a twig.

Cook had come home from school and discovered his father weeping over her body, drunk and ugly.

"She fell, goddammit," he snapped. *"And that's all you gotta know, you little bastard."*

Cook could still remember the sense of acceptance he'd felt. The sense of calm knowing the worst had finally happened. He'd set his books down, went into the den and got the shotgun. He remembered grinning as he chambered a shell. Grinning as he pumped it into his father's chest.

Self-defense, they'd said.

They were wrong.

It wasn't self-defense, but it wasn't murder either; it was eradication, extermination. Much as you eradicated a weed that threatened your garden or exterminated termites that infested your home. Some things had to be done for the good of all.

Yes, Saks was his father reincarnated.

Cook didn't doubt this.

And if the two of them washed up on a desert island or they were the only ones in a lifeboat, Cook knew what would happen. As soon as Saks closed his eyes, he would kill

the bastard.

And smile as he did so.

5

"You ever been shipwrecked before?"

"Once," Gosling said, "off the coast of Labrador."

"How long?"

"Six hours before I got picked up. I was a mate on an ore freighter. She was improperly loaded, they said. Ore shifted, snapped her in half. Lost twenty men. I was one of the lucky ones. I floated on a piece of planking until I saw a channel buoy. I made my way to it, waited there. A Coast Guard ship picked me up."

George floated in the slimy water, wondering maybe if it was contaminated with something. Maybe the ship had been carrying chemicals and maybe that weird water quality was due to the fact that they were bobbing in a sea of toxic waste. Sure, he found himself thinking, you're probably already poisoned, shit's eating through your skin.

A normal explanation like that would have been almost preferable.

"Was it better or worse than this?" George asked. "That other time?"

Gosling wouldn't qualify it, though. "Well, water was cold. And there was this shark that kept circling me. Never came close. Just circled. When I was on the buoy, he finally gave up."

"Shit, you must've been terrified."

"Was. At first. But after a time and he didn't attack, I got used to him. Called him Charlie. I talked to him all the time. The only time I was really afraid was at night when I couldn't see him."

"And he never attacked?"

"Nope. Never even came close."

"Well, if a shark comes along," George said, "you talk to him."

That made Gosling laugh, only it wasn't a good sort of laughter.

They floated on, the water around them gelatinous and syrupy, clumps of weed drifting past from time to time. The water was warm like a mud bath, but the air was chill and dank. It made steam boil from the surface. And the fog? Yellow and white, billowing and thick like a fine cottony weave, charged with that ghostly radiance. It was moist on their faces, left a greasy residue on their skin.

That stink was there, too, but they were used to it now and didn't smell it much more than a bum smells his own body odor.

George was wondering when his lifejacket would get saturated and he'd go down like a brick, down into those awful black depths. The idea of that made him shiver, despite the heat surging around him. It was hard to imagine all that water beneath him. Like some huge alien world that only fish, crawling things, and dead men ever saw. He could almost see it down there himself. Desolate mountain ranges and abyssal pockets of blackness. Like the geography of some distant planet, some submerged graveyard.

George was thinking this, knowing such morbid thoughts were probably not a good idea, and that's when he saw something drifting in their direction not ten feet away. That crazy shine in the fog was reflecting off its surface which looked smooth and wet and oddly circular.

"Hell is that?" Gosling said, a note of panic in his voice.

George was looking at it, shivering again now, thinking it looked like some immense, rubbery eyeball rising from the depths. And the idea of that made him go hollow inside.

"Jesus . . . I think," Gosling began, "I think . . . I think it's a survival raft."

They started paddling over there, Gosling in the lead. George trying to keep up with him. As they got close, George could see it was nothing so fantastic as an eyeball, but something the general shape of a donut. It didn't look much like a raft, but then he realized it must have inflated upside down. When they boarded the *Mara Corday,* Gosling went through the drill with all of them. Lifeboat stations and the like. He had explained to them that the survival rafts were in containers and would inflate automatically, that if the containers were submerged in ten or twelve feet of water-like if the ship sank-a hydrostatic mechanism would release the rafts and they'd bob to the surface, inflating.

Gosling and he took hold of the righting strap and heaved back with everything they had. On the third try, the raft broke the suction of the water and flipped over, sending George underwater momentarily. He came back up, gasping and spitting water from his mouth. Maybe he couldn't smell the stink of it any more . . . but the taste, the feel of it in his mouth was horrible. Like a mouthful of slime warm as bathwater. Sickening.

Gosling thought it was pretty funny. "I told you she'd come over quick when she did," he said.

George ignored him. The raft was big now that it was floating right side up, looked something like a tent floating on tubes. Just the feel of it made George feel safer, stronger. His fingers closed on the rungs of its small boarding ladder. He and Gosling hung there for a moment and caught their breath. This, they decided, was an unbelievable bit of luck. And when you considered that heavy fog, it was surely that.

Gosling pulled himself aboard and then helped George in.

"Home sweet home," George said, curled up on the deck plates.

He was grateful to be out of that water. The raft had a canopy overhead that you could zip free if you needed to. It was wonderful to be in there, to be in a dry enclosed space. The raft was built to accommodate a dozen men, so there was plenty of room.

"She's a beauty," Gosling said, "our savior is."

And she was.

It was well-equipped, George found out, as Gosling pointed out all the features. There were countless pockets for equipment, flares, inflation valves that you could pump with a bellows (included), and a survival kit. The survival kit, probably the most exciting feature, came in a waterproof, rubberized box. It contained 18 pints of fresh water, 8 flares, 2 bailers, fishhooks, fishing line, a signal mirror, flashlight, extra paddles, bellows, a first aid kit, and food. The latter consisted mainly of chocolate, bread, freeze-dried soups and stews, glucose and salt tablets.

There was a line running from one end into the water. George was examining it. "What's this do?"

"That's our sea anchor," Gosling explained. "Sort of like a water parachute. It keeps us from drifting due to the wind."

"They think of everything," George said. And they had.

There was even a small waterproof flashlight and extra batteries, a bunch of

lightsticks. Using one of them, Gosling set up the radio beacon and VHF radio. He started transmitting right away.

George swigged from a plastic water bottle. “Hell, we should be okay now. I mean, hell, at least we won’t drown. Sooner or later, this fog has to lift and then . . .”

But he didn’t finish that and Gosling did not comment on it. For that was really what they were both wondering: what came next? What would happen next? Because something had to and that something could either be good or bad. Sure, they were safe and sound in the raft and Gosling was an old hand with survival equipment. He’d keep them alive. But beyond that?

No answers.

No nothing.

Gosling finally gave up on the radio. “Nothing out there. Just static. Kind of a buzzing sound now and then.”

“Do you think it’s a signal?” George asked, trying to keep that hopeful tone from his voice.

Gosling just shrugged, his face artificial-looking in the glow of the lightstick. “If it is, it’s like nothing I’ve ever heard before.”

George sat there, telling himself he had to be satisfied with what they had because things had definitely improved. And he had to be happy with that. But he *wasn’t* happy with that, he was not satisfied by any of it.

“Paul,” he said, realizing it was probably the first time he’d called Gosling by his Christian name. “Paul . . . what the hell is this all about? The fog, the wreck . . . all of it, it’s not right and we both know it. You had to watch what you said before when we were aboard ship because I was a passenger and you were in charge. But now you might as well come clean . . . where in the Christ are we?”

Gosling pressed his lips tight, looked stern. Maybe he was formulating a lie, a half-truth, something that would keep George’s spirits buoyant. But in the end, he just shook his head and ran fingers through his graying crewcut. “Don’t know, George. Don’t know where we are or how we got here anymore than you do” He took a sip of water. “Sailors, they like to tell stories and one they’ve been recycling for ages is the one about the Sargasso Sea, the Devil’s Graveyard, the Sea of Lost Ships and all that . . . some awful place where ships and their crews never return from . . .”

He recounted the tales of the mythical Sargasso for him, explaining that there was nothing truly mysterious about it. That, yes, lots of ships had disappeared there, many derelicts had been found drifting, but he couldn’t say as to whether it was worse than any other body of water. It was a seaweed-sea, he told George, a floating desert of weed and those weed banks were as large as islands in some places. It was like a whirpool of sorts, with conflicting currents at its edges creating a great dead, weedy area. In the age of sail, ships had been becalmed there and quite a few never escaped. They were found crewed by skeletons. When men did come out, they told unpleasant, disturbing tales of things they’d seen.

“But it doesn’t mean anything, George. It really doesn’t. None of it proves a goddamn thing,” he said, trying to dispel the import of what he’d already said. “There are sane, logical explanations for most of that business. But most sailors? They prefer the more outlandish explanations. Makes for a good spooky tale to pass the hours with.”

George didn't like any of it, didn't actually believe it any more than Gosling did . . . but it accounted for a few things and that's what dried the spit up in his mouth.

"And you're saying our last confirmed position was at the edge of the Sargasso Sea? The *real* Sargasso Sea?" he asked.

Gosling nodded. "Yes. And then . . ."

But George knew that part.

That fog rolling at them, the air being sucked away . . . and then they were lost, navigational instruments acting funny. Sure, he knew that part just fine. Gosling wanted very much to dismiss it all, but once the cat was out of the bag, just try and get it back in.

"What if there is something to it, Paul? What if we've sailed into one of those dead zones you mentioned, a dead sea? What then? Where in Christ does any of that leave us? What can we do?"

But Gosling just shook his head.

He took his lightstick and went over to the doorway of the canopy, adjusting the drag of the sea anchor. He explained that while there was no wind, they were still moving, being pulled gradually by what he surmised were subsurface currents.

"The anchor will keep us moving in pretty much a straight line," he said. "Because . . . yeah, we're moving, all right . . . there's tension on the line. We're being dragged somewhere."

George was at the doorway with him, watching the mist out there, moving around them. Patches of red were reflected against it from the flashing beacon atop the raft. Other than that, sometimes the mist was dim and other times brighter. The illumination it threw was about what you got at twilight . . . things were visible, just not terribly distinct.

Gosling took up a handful of water, examined it by the light of the stick. It was not water as such, but a slime of liquid jelly and sediment in an aqueous suspension. And it was pink in color, almost red it seemed. It smelled like rotten eggs up close.

"That's not right," George said. "I've never seen water like that."

Gosling admitted he hadn't either, but said it reminded him of "red tide", when patches of ocean went crimson from dense concentrations of microscopic algae. "I don't recommend drinking it."

It was the first time George had seen the stuff by true light. And it made him remember that when they'd righted the raft, he'd gotten a mouthful. But he hadn't swallowed any . . . he didn't think so, anyway.

"Fucking place," he said.

Gosling laughed. "You got that right."

George cleared his throat, remembering the taste of that slop in his mouth. "I wonder if the others-"

He never finished that, for out of the fog there came a high, keening wail that was strident and ear-piercing. It rose up sharp and whining like a cicada in a summer field, then faded away just as quickly.

"Jesus Christ," he said, digging at his left ear with a finger. "What the fuck was that?"

Gosling just shook his head.

They sat there in silence, waiting for it to come again, but it never did. There was something about the quality of that wail that was alarming, that got right inside of them

and made them want to hold on tight. It reminded George of some high-pitched version of an air raid siren . . . except he didn't think it was a mechanical device. He had the crazy, frightening idea that something living had made it. But what that could be, he did not know. Regardless, it left him feeling numb, helpless, wanting to cry out, but not daring to.

"Well," Gosling said. "Well."

That pretty much summed it up, for what else was there really to say?

And maybe, given time and peace, they would have tried to figure it out, tried to come up with something rational that would have wrapped it up nicely, but there was no time. For something thudded into the bottom of the raft. Something big, for it lifted the raft up five or six inches and dropped it back down again. George cried out in surprise, maybe it was more of a scream than a cry for Gosling grabbed him by the arm and his grip was like a clamp.

Again, they were waiting.

Whatever it was, it did not strike the raft again. But it passed beneath several times and its wake made the raft bob and sway, sent that jellied sea to rolling in slow, slushy undulations like ripples in a mud hole. George could barely breathe, could barely pull a breath past his lips they were pressed so tight. Gosling's hand was still on his arm, tight and crushing.

Five minutes later, it had not returned.

"Must have been big," Gosling finally said, releasing George's arm. "Must have been goddamn real big."

Which was exactly what George was thinking. Except the word bouncing through his head was *colossal.* It was the only one that satisfied his runaway imagination. He was thinking something like a whale or the mother of all sharks. Jesus.

"It's gone," Gosling said, his voice a little forced. "Whatever it was, it's gone."

"But-"

"But nothing. It didn't attack us, so the hell with it. Just because something's big, don't mean it's nasty."

George supposed there was logic to that.

He stayed by the doorway, watching, guarding against he did not know what. Gosling went back to his radio and George was glad of it. For what was there to say? What could they possibly manufacture to explain that one?

But he got to thinking: *Still don't mean shit and you know it. Still don't mean you're lost in the Bermuda fucking Triangle or something like that. It could have been a whale for chrissake. Quit panicking already.*

George started going through every whale he'd ever seen on every nature documentary on the Discovery Channel. He tried to remember their names and what they looked with. For reasons he wasn't even sure of, this calmed him. This put something to bed in his imagination and locked the beasts of childhood terror in their respective cages.

He looked at the sea anchor line. It was clotted with weeds and green nets of something like an aquatic moss.

"Scrape it off," Gosling told him, handing him one of the little rubberized oars.

George took it, leaned over, started peeling the stuff away, a big and heavy clump of it was tangled on the oar. It smelled rank. He tossed it aside, heard it splash, and then saw that there was something still stuck on the blade of the oar. It was about the size of a

shoe. In the dim light he could see it was a clot of something . . . something odd. He pulled the oar in, made to brush the mass aside with his fingers.

The mass *moved.*

George cried out in shock, dropped the oar. It floated just behind the raft, the mass still intact. Gosling was there by then, he cursed George for dropping the oar and brought the lightstick out so he could grab it.

But he didn't grab it.

He didn't dare.

George saw it and just stared. Sitting on the end of the oar was something like a round, thick spiderish body, ringed by dozens and dozens of legs. They were segmented and dirty-brown in color. Two of them were up in the air, shuddering. From the top of its body there was a cluster of things like yellow grapes that he realized must have been eyes. As Gosling brought the light closer, a pink membrane slid over them.

George wasn't sure if it was an insect or a crustacean or a mollusk for that matter. Only that it was disgusting and he had a mad desire to smash it.

"What in the Christ?" Gosling said.

It just sat there, looking oddly grotesque and comical at the same time with all those eyes. George could see that they were set on stalks and jerked slightly as it looked about.

Carefully, Gosling grabbed the end of the oar, tried to shake that beastie off, but it held on tenaciously. Taking up another of the oars, he swatted at it and it moved. George had a nightmarish image in his mind of the thing running up the oar and wrapping itself around Gosling's arm, but it didn't happen.

Gosling swatted it again, this time making contact.

It made a weird, almost birdlike peeping sound and ran off. Actually *ran* over the surface of the water, skimming along easily like a water strider. Then it vanished in the fog.

"What do you suppose that was?" George asked, more amused than anything. The idea of it being on you was offensive, but he didn't really think it was dangerous. "What sort of critter is that? And please tell me you've seen one before, Paul, or I'm going to start thinking hard on that Sargasso-shit you told me"

"No, never seen a critter like that before. Like a sea spider gone all crazy," was all he would say.

He went back to his radio and George sat there, wishing he had a cigarette or a drink, just about anything to pass the time with. Because with that ever-present fog, time was distorted and he just couldn't seem to get his internal clock moving.

Again he waited, wondering what the next thing would be and whether it would amuse him or scare the shit out of him. Gosling was suddenly very talkative, going on and on about an old Chevy Bel-Air he was fixing up.

But George wasn't paying attention.

He was seeing something out in the fog . . . or thought he was. He kept watching it, his skin feeling so tight it felt like it might split open. His eyes would not blink. Yes, there it was again. A huge amorphous shadow, passing deeper into the mist.

"There's something out there," he said, his voice dry as sand.

"Could be another raft," Gosling said, grabbing a flare pistol to signal with. He

got up by George and watched, saw something vague out there, but just for an instant

"It's not a raft," George said.

"It's too far, you can't tell."

"Oh," he breathed, "I could tell."

Gosling just looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is unless rafts have big green eyes that shine in the dark, that was no raft."

6

"Hey, Fabrini," Saks said, "what's the difference between your mother and a refrigerator?"

"Just fuck off," Fabrini said.

"Wrong. The difference is that your meat don't fart when you pull it out of a refrigerator."

Menhaus giggled. "That's a good one, Saks. I'll have to remember that."

"Yeah, you remember it, dipshit."

Saks was figuring, according to the luminous dial of his watch, that the sun would be up in an hour or so. And maybe when that happened, it would burn off the damn fog. But he had his doubts. He had doubts about a lot of things, only he wasn't voicing them. These two . . . Menhaus and Fabrini . . . they weren't much. They were both scared white and maybe, inside, Saks was, too. But he couldn't let them see that. Way he was figuring things, he was in charge and he had to set an example for those two wet-ends. He started telling them what he was really thinking about all this, that it was the mother of all clusterfucks, and those two pussies would be pissing themselves and calling for their mothers.

No, somebody had to exhibit some balls here and Saks figured the mantle had fallen to him.

What he was really thinking about this whole mess was not good. Maybe they were still in the Atlantic and maybe they'd been vomited somewhere else. Didn't much matter when you came down to it. What mattered is how they handled it and how they were going to stay alive.

Fabrini was the real problem here. He kept saying things that were getting Menhaus all worked up. And Saks couldn't have that. Couldn't have him going on about sea monsters and shit like that. Sure, they'd all heard those sounds out in the fog, the sounds of men being eaten, but if they were going to keep their heads out here, they couldn't be dwelling on those things.

That's why Saks was riding Fabrini all the time. Keep him in line, keep him on edge so he couldn't spend his time undermining authority here. That and the fact that he didn't like Fabrini, him and his Mediterranean good looks and muscles. Kind of guy women went for. Kind of guy that, down deep, maybe Saks felt threatened by.

Fabrini kept muttering something under his breath. Saks could hear him. Figured maybe he was losing it. That happened, Saks figured he'd feed his dumb wop ass to the fishies . . . or whatever else might be out there.

"Fabrini? What the hell are you doing? Whispering sweet nothings to Menhaus or what?"

"I think he's praying," Menhaus said.

"Are you praying, Fabrini?"

"What the hell's it to ya?"

"Maybe," Menhaus began, choking on his words, "we should just leave him alone, Saks. You don't wanna bother a guy when-"

"Yeah, maybe you're right, Menhaus. I'd sure as hell hate to interrupt John the

Fucking Bapist in his daily devotion."

Fabrini kept mumbling. He was making a conscious effort to ignore Saks and the world in general. Not that Saks was going to put up with it.

"Maybe we should pray too, Menhaus. Whaddya say?"

"I'm not much on that."

"Oh, come on, let's. Me and you and shit-fer-brains here can hold hands and pray to God and when we're done hail-Marying we can have a nice little circle jerk, just the three of us." He laughed shallowly. "How's that sound, Fagbrini? Maybe we can work our way up on this crate and have a clusterfuck."

Fabrini kept praying, his eyes squeezed tight, his ears all but shut to the insults being directed at him. He hadn't prayed since he was boy. He'd pretty much written off God and religion as a bullshit sedative for the masses. But like any man in crisis, he was willing to try anything.

In the gloom, Saks was keeping an eye on Menhaus. They'd both started losing it after those sounds in the fog, but Menhaus more than Fabrini because Fabrini had some balls and Menhaus was the sort that needed to be led. He was the sort that needed someone to hold his dick for him, show him where to piss and what to wipe. He wanted somebody to make his decisions for him, tell him what he was supposed to think and how he was supposed to feel about things.

Guy like that, you could lead real easy.

Right then, Menhaus wasn't doing so good. That business in the fog, those sounds, it was unraveling him.

"Listen to Fabrini there, Menhaus, what a fucking waste. Lucky you got me here. You got any good jokes so I don't have to listen to Fagbrini praying for a bigger rod?"

Menhaus could fire one off after another most days. He was a repository of dirty jokes and salty anecdotes. Right then, though, he was having trouble. Staring into the fog and having trouble with a lot of things. "Um . . . let me think here . . . I . . . oh yeah, what did one condom say to the other condom when they passed by the gay bar?"

"I don't know."

"Let's go in there and get shitfaced."

Saks laughed until he started coughing. "I gotta better one. What does a sunken ship and Fabrini's asshole have in common?"

"Can't say."

"Dead sea-men."

Menhaus started chuckling and stopped.

"Listen, motherfucker," Fabrini growled, snapped out of his devotions, "you better knock this shit off. I'm warning you, fatass. I'm not in the mood for yer crap."

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry," Saks said.

"He's just kidding you," Menhaus said.

Saks sighed. "Sure I am, Fabrini. You know I'd never do anything to hurt your feelings. You mean too much to me, sweetheart."

"Go fuck yourself."

"I would but you'd get all excited."

Fabrini resumed praying.

"Hey, Menhaus," Saks said. "You hear about the time Fagbrini got VD? He goes

to the doctor and the doctor tells him, yeah, you got the clap. 'You know who gave it you?' the doc says. Fabrini says, 'No, silly, I never saw his face, he was behind me all the time.'"

Menhaus couldn't keep from laughing at that one. He could feel Fabrini glaring at him, yet he couldn't stop laughing. He laughed and laughed and then he stopped because he got to thinking maybe was laughing too much. Maybe it wasn't that funny after all. Maybe, maybe-

"Jesus Christ, Saks, what the hell is this all about? I think I'm losing my mind or something. Where are we?"

"He don't know, Menhaus," Fabrini said, his words full of dread. "Nobody knows where we are. This place . . . this is where all those ships go, the ones that disappear. Sometimes they drift back out, but there ain't no people on 'em."

"Shut the hell up, fuckhead," Saks snapped at him. "You don't know shit. Goddamn moron."

All Fabrini did was laugh. And that laughter was bitter and haunted, filled with cynicism and a hint of stark madness. "You still think we're on earth, Saks? That what you think? Well, guess again, because we got sucked into some dark closet just this side of hell and we ain't ever getting out."

"Shit," Menhaus said. "Oh, shit . . ."

"Don't listen to him, Menhaus. Don't let him get to you. See? That's what he wants. He wants to tear your guts out, wants to bring you down to his level," Saks said, trying to sound smart and urbane and sympathetic, maybe more than a little superior. "Guys like Fabrini, they don't have any balls. They wander through their pathetic, empty lives trying to make up for their little dicks-"

"Go fuck yourself, Saks, you goddamn idiot," Fabrini said, derailed by the master once again.

Menhaus looked from one to the other in the gloom as they traded insults, ran down each other's manhood and mothers. He felt like a metal filing caught between two magnets. And down deep, he was starting to really wonder which of them was the craziest.

"My watch is reading almost eight in the morning," Fabrini said. "If you're so smart, Saks, then why ain't the sun coming up?"

"You're watch is fucked," he lied. "Besides, in this pea soup, you won't even see the sun."

That got Fabrini laughing. "Oh really? Why don't you just admit it, Saks, the sun don't come up in this place. It's always dark and foggy and out there, out in that damn fog, there's things that'll chew your insides out . . ."

Menhaus was trying not to listen, but it was all bouncing around inside his head, tearing things up. "It'll come up . . . the sun has to come up, don't it, Saks?"

"Sure. Sure it will. Once it burns this fog off, then we'll be able to see where we are. The others'll be able to see us, too."

Fabrini barked that cynical laugh again. "Yeah, and so will whatever got the other boat . . ."

7

Thing was, nobody knew where they were.

They thought things and they said things and they repeated maritime horror tales, but not a one of them could truly guess the severity of their situation or how far it was they were from home.

Yet, each man hoped against hope. Each one carried a vision of the gleaming ship that would whisk them away to civilization. They would be given dry clothes. Beds. There would be mugs of coffee and cool water. Tables piled abundantly with eggs and pancakes, ham and bacon, bread and fruit, steak and potatoes, pie and cake.

They hoped, but none of them really expected it to happen.

They expected torment and death. They expected thirst and drowning. They expected starvation. They expected suffering in all its guises and, yes, they expected things to come at them out of the mist, the sort of things that had crawled alive and breathing from nightmares and cellars and dank, dark places.

And on this matter, they were right.

8

Cook figured he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew Crycek was digging in the supply compartments of the lifeboat. He could hear him swearing under his breath and then the boat rocked slightly as he stood up, saying, *"Here! Here! Jesus Christ, we're over here!"*

He raised something up above his head, something like a cylinder, and there was a muted pop and overhead, far up in that swirling vortex of mist, a flare burst in a shower of red sparks. It drifted through the fog, creating darting shadows and casting flickering bands of red-orange light. In that eerie, strobing illumination you could see just how thick that fog was. How it was composed of billowing layers pressed upon layers like blankets of smoky ether.

"What is it?" Cook asked, springing up now. "A plane? Did you see a plane or a ship?"

Crycek just watched that flare drift off, slowly sinking into the swamp of fog, his face lit by muted flashes of red light that were going yellow now.

"What did you see?" Cook asked again.

Sighing, Crycek sank back in his seat. "I . . . I'm not sure. It was a light, high up there, a light passed over us."

Cook licked his lips. They were suddenly very dry. Like chalk. "A light? What sort of light? Like a searchlight?"

But Crycek shook his head, said it wasn't that kind of light. It was sort of bluish, funny, just a glowing ball of blue light . . . that he didn't hear any engine noise. Not a thing. Just the light, the light.

Cook didn't like it, wasn't entirely sure why. Only that, yes, it unnerved him. A blue glowing light, but no sound of engines? Not a helicopter or plane then . . . because you would have heard it in this godawful graveyard silence. But if not a chopper or a plane . . . then what? And he supposed that's what was getting to him. Crawling down into his guts and making something sharp prod at his bowels, making them want to void right down his leg.

Something flying up there. . . something glowing. . . something that did not make a sound.

"Gone now," Crycek said, sounding very much like he wanted to break down and cry. "It's gone now and we're still here, still in this fucking fog."

Cook wanted to reassure him . . . but what was there to reassure him about? He was right: they *were* still in that fucking fog.

But at least, he thought, we have not been seen yet.

Again, he wasn't entirely sure why he was thinking things like that, letting that scratching paranoia open him up in all the wrong places, but he was. Because here, in this world of fog and stink and steaming rank sea, maybe keeping your head down, maybe hiding and not being seen . . . maybe that was the best you could hope for.

Cook popped another lightstick, took a good look at Hupp's wounds. Crycek was cradling his head in his lap, stroking his brow. Cook looked at him and what passed between them was a prognosis and it wasn't good. Most of the hair was singed from

Hupp's head including his left eyebrow. His face discolored by a livid purple bruise. There was dried blood on his mouth, some of it around his nose and ears. The skin of his chest and arms was raw and hurting. Where it wasn't raw it was scorched and blackened. Rivulets of sweat ran down his brow. He was shaking and shivering. Now and again, he would moan. There was a heat coming off him, feverish and sickening . . . and the smell, a hot sour stink like the breath of a dying man.

"No chance is there?" Cook said.

"Not unless we get picked up real soon."

Cook licked his lips. "What are the chances of that?"

Crycek just stared at him. "What do you think?"

"I'm just asking because you're a sailor."

Crycek shrugged. "Good, I guess, if someone picked up our distress signal. If that's the case, someone'll be along soon. Should've been here by now really. And there's always the radio beacons. All the rafts and boat have 'em. They begin transmitting the moment they hit water."

But Crycek had already explained those. They were called EPIRBs, Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacons. They pulsed signals over marine and aviation distress frequencies. Class A EPIRBs also transmitted a signal that could be picked up by the SARSAT satellite. The lifeboat had one that started working the moment it hit the water. Cook himself had started the manual unit he found in the emergency equipment by following the directions on the container.

"And there's the radio, of course," Crycek said, his voice not much above a whisper now. "All those distress calls we've been sending . . . if there's anybody out there, they'll hear 'em."

And that's exactly what Crycek said word for word, but what Cook was hearing was more along the lines of: *If there's anybody out there, why, we've just invited them in, haven't we?*

No, Cook didn't like it much. Didn't like the idea of them being listened to, monitored, that somebody out there could find them just by homing in on the signals. The idea of it filled his mind with a shapeless, blowing blackness that made him afraid right to the core of his being.

He thought: *But isn't that what you wanted? Somebody to hear you? To find you?*

Only he wasn't so sure anymore. Wasn't sure of a lot of things. All he was going on here was instinct maybe colored by imagination, but it was telling him that the thing to do in this place was to keep a low profile. He didn't know what he was expecting really, but he was getting some bad vibes about it. And hour by hour, they were getting worse. Like some latent sixth sense in him was trying to warn him of impending danger.

And what it really came down to, the very thing Cook couldn't even bring himself to admit to, was that he didn't know where they were, but he had a nasty feeling you wouldn't find it on any map . . . at least, not one drawn by anyone sane. Nothing about this place was right. According to his internal clock the sun should have been up (he was guessing) an hour or more by now . . . but there was no sign of it. Not so much as a smudge of brightness up there. And while it wasn't dark exactly, it was not actually light either. Things seemed to be caught somewhere in-between like a drawn-out midsummer twilight. That wasn't right. That brooding, suffocating fog wasn't right. The slopping,

jellied sea was not right. And that pervasive gassy stench . . . no, that was certainly not right either. So, with that in mind, Cook was pretty much figuring that if there was an intelligence here that could monitor radio signals, then it wouldn't be of the human variety.

And that, most assuredly, scared the hell out of him.

Sighing, deciding he was probably losing his mind an inch at a time, he looked out over that stagnant sea, wondering, thinking. Now and then he caught sight of wreckage-charred bits of wood, splintered beams, a crate or two, but never anything more than that. Unless you wanted to count clumps of floating weeds, spreading near-submerged things that steamed as if they'd just been pulled out of a boiling pot.

"I guess we just drift," Crycek said, the words coming out of him like air from a leaking tire. "We just drift and we wait."

None of that gave Cook any real hope. He was not an optimist by nature, but neither was he a pessimist. He was balanced on the borderline in-between, what his mother had once called a realist. Both he and Crycek could live for weeks with what was in the boat, but Hupp was doomed if help didn't come soon. And maybe it was already too late.

Already too late for everyone concerned.

Cook had never felt quite so alone in his life.

He had always been something of a loner. It was the way he was, had always been. He didn't trust people. He decided early on that they were basically evil creatures hiding beneath a veneer of civilization . . . that is, when they bothered to hide at all. Many didn't. And he wasn't sure whether he liked these better than the others or not.

Crazy as it sounded at this stage of the game, he still entertained fantasies of washing up on some deserted tropical isle. All by himself. No one to bother him, give him trouble or pain. Just nature and he. He could catch his meals from the sea, scavenge for edible plants and berries. It would be a simple life. One that he was psychologically suited for.

Hupp began to moan and thrash around noisily.

"Here, here," Crycek said. "I've got you now. You're okay."

At the sound of his voice, Hupp quieted down. Crycek was very good with him, Cook thought. A born nursemaid. It took the right kind of person to care for others like that. And it was exactly what Crycek needed. There was something brewing in him, something hot and sharp that was cutting him open from the inside. Caring for his shipmate gave him an anchor, it cemented him to the here and now.

And without it? Cook didn't want to think about that.

"You better try that radio again, don't you think?" Crycek said and Cook was pretty certain there was something behind his words, something like sarcasm.

"I suppose."

But he didn't want to do that. It was about the last thing in the world he really wanted. And that's when he decided it was all a sick fucking game between the two them. They both knew that it was hopeless, that the Coast Guard couldn't send out a rescue mission even if they wanted to. But they weren't going to admit that out loud. Something in them just refused to. For maybe once such things were voiced there was no going back. Like calling up some demon from the formless ebon pits of the universe, once you said its

name aloud, you admitted its reality.

So Cook went through the bit of transmitting a distress call and it was funny how his voice got on that radio now. Where before it was loud and clear and insistent, now he practically mumbled the words into the mic like he didn't want anybody hearing him.

"You hearing . . . anything out there?" Crycek was asking him.

But Cook just shook his head. Just dead air and white noise. A raging storm of static that his mind pictured to be white and blowing like some electrical blizzard, a vast and tangled sound full of fuzz and friction and emptiness. It was a sound the human mind had trouble with. It grasped and fought to separate something, anything it could identify. And after a time, if it couldn't get a hold of anything, it would create something before it went mad.

Cook kept listening, knowing he had to.

He began to hear odd patterns in it, the static rising and falling in gentle oscillations that sounded very much like breathing, respiration, something pulling air into its lungs and exhaling. But not air . . . static, in and out, in and out. He was hearing it and knowing it was his imagination, but unable to stop listening. There was something morphic, hypnotizing about it and you couldn't pull your mind away. You could only listen to the static breathing, filling its lungs with that droning white noise and feel yourself being pulled away, floating.

And about that time, Cook heard something come up out of that static, a voice that was clear and crisp and evil. A woman's voice: *"That's right, Cook . . . you just keep dreaming and drifting . . . I'm out here in the fog, I'm waiting for you out here, waiting to touch you-"*

And maybe the voice itself wasn't so evil, but its intent was unmistakable. Cook dropped the radio and fell backward onto the deck. Crycek was saying something, but he could not hear him. Could not hear anything but the static now and maybe the fog whispering and that clotted sea sluicing and that voice echoing in his head.

"Christ, Cook . . . what's wrong?" Crycek was saying, sounding desperate now.

Cook poured some steel into his rubbery limbs, pulled himself up, just shaking his head. "Nothing," he said. "It was nothing." And he knew that sounded foolish, ridiculous, but it was the truth. Because he hadn't really heard a woman's voice out there, some malefic female ghost inviting him to doom and madness. Just imagination. He was tired and scared and confused and his imagination had spun all that into the worst thing it could imagine.

His breathing slowed now and he felt foolish. Utterly foolish. He reached over to turn the radio off and, yes, it was still blaring static, but mixed in with it were those buzzing pulses he'd heard earlier. Something his mind had tagged as Morse Code for wasps.

He shut the radio off.

"Better conserve batteries," he said, feeling, really *feeling* that fog out there now. Certain it was reaching out for him, wanting to drag him into a murky, enclosing shroud of itself.

"What did you hear?" Crycek wanted to know.

"Thought . . . well, I thought I heard a voice. Just my mind playing tricks on me. I need some sleep."

Crycek nodded. “There’s funny things in the fog. Funny, weird things. I know all about that. Maybe some of it’s imagination, but not all of it . . . no sir.”

Cook just sat there, not saying a thing. Crycek was ready to talk now. He wanted to say things and none of it was going to be good.

“I was out there, Cook. I was one of the ones that went to look for Stokes, the guy who jumped overboard. Gosling, the First, he picked me. Picked me because he must have known I was scared of the fog,” Crycek said, his voice low and even and somehow unpleasant. “We went out in the boats to look. Out into that goddamn fog. And I’m not too proud to admit I was afraid. I was afraid from the moment that boat touched water. Terrified. Because that fog wasn’t right then and it’s not right now. Yeah, I knew there were things out in that fog . . . crawling, pallid things . . . abominations . . . things that would drive you mad just to look upon them. Yes, I knew that.”

Cook swallowed. “C’mon, Crycek. Just take it easy.”

“Take it easy?” He uttered a short, sharp laugh that was more like the bark of a dog. It was flat and empty-sounding. Cook was glad, really glad he could not see Crycek’s face then, because he knew it would have been bad, a shroud chewed by lunacy. “Sure, I’ll take it easy. Out in that fog . . . we were hearing things. Things like voices calling us . . . awful, clotted voices spoken through mouths full of seaweed . . . and once, just the once, I heard laughter. A cackling laughter that almost finished me. And then, oh yes, then I saw something. I saw it and it saw me.”

Cook’s arms were full of gooseflesh. He could barely find his voice. “What? What did you see?”

But Crycek could only shake his head back and forth, make a weird whimpering sound low in his throat. “It . . . it was staring at me out of the fog. Something slimy and stinking with a long neck like a light post. It had a head, something like a head, but all curled-up like a snail shell. Jelly was dripping from it and there was some kind of growth hanging from it, like weeds or dangling roots, only they were crawling and twisting. And its eyes . . . oh dear God, those eyes, huge and yellow and wicked, staring at me, *staring right into me like they meant to eat my soul raw . . .”*

Crycek’s voice faded out and maybe he with it. He was shaking and making sobbing sounds, his fist shoved up against his mouth so maybe he wouldn’t scream his mind away.

Hupp began to moan and thrash.

“Easy,” Crycek said. “Easy . . . I won’t let it get you, I swear to God I won’t . . . when it comes for us, I’ll cheat it. Yes, I’ll cheat it.”

He started giggling then.

Cook had all he could do not to join him.

And then there was a sound.

Something was coming out of the fog.

9

It was Fabrini who saw the flare.

The flare Crycek fired off. And that's how they found the lifeboat in the fog.

"Paddle, you goat fuck," Saks snapped at Menhaus. "It's a goddamn boat!"

"I'm doing my best," Menhaus said under his breath.

"So do better."

But it wasn't easy. Not for any of them. Fabrini had sighted the boat just as Saks was asking him if his parents had any children that lived. They'd swung right into action, but it was tough going. It wasn't easy to hang onto the wet, slimy crate and paddle your feet at the same time. And the crate wasn't the easiest thing in the world to navigate or steer.

"Let's just abandon it," Menhaus panted, "and swim for it,"

"No way," Fabrini said.

"He's right, Menhaus. If we don't make the boat and we ditch the crate, we won't have anything. Keep going."

Saks was getting damn tired of the both of them. Why, if this had to happen at all, couldn't he have found himself adrift with say George Ryan or Cushing? Two smart guys there. They kept their wits about them. Not a couple of idiots like Menhaus and that dumb-fuck Fabrini. Fabrini was like some kind of poster child for incompetence and in-breeding. And Menhaus . . . Christ, what a piece of work. God must've been laughing when he brought those two into being. Some kind of heavenly practical joke. Fabrini's old lady should've kept her legs closed . . . or dropped him into the toilet with the rest of the turds when the time came. One little flush and the world would have been spared so much.

"It's one of the lifeboats," Menhaus gasped. "From the ship."

And it was. They could see someone — Saks thought it was Cook — waving and waving to them. There was someone else in there waving, too.

Why don't the stupid fucks row over to us? Saks wondered.

He didn't know why but he had a pretty good feeling he was going to have to knock a few melons together when he reached the boat. Goddamn lazy sonsofbitches. But it was just like Cook. A guy like that didn't do squat until you told him so. When he took a shit, you had to show him which end to use.

"We're going to make it," Fabrini said.

"Yeah," Saks said. "Your prayers worked, camel dung. What else did you wish for? A bunch of horny pirates to pick you up and gangrape you?"

"Your turn's coming, Saks, just you wait."

"Yeah, if you can get your tongue out of Menhaus' bum long enough."

They kept swimming, gripping the crate, and paddling with their feet. It was slow going and exhausting work, swimming through that turgid, oily slop but no one was complaining. They would've swam through a septic tank to get to that boat. It was the light at the end of the tunnel . . . or at least a glimmer of it.

"Okay," Saks said, "swim for it! We don't need the crate!"

They all pushed away and made a beeline for the boat which was mere yards away

now. It seemed like the longest distance any of them had ever traversed.

"I can't," Menhaus panted, coming to a rest, feeling that water around him, warm and thick and oddly comforting. "I can't . . . do . . . it."

"Come on," Fabrini said, grabbing him by the lifejacket and towing him along. "You can do it, goddammit. You can."

"Oh, leave him," Saks said. "Let the fishies play with him."

They paddled and fought their way to the boat. Through that marshy, miasmic sea, fingers clawing through islands of decomposing seaweed. A yellow, rank mist rose from the water. When they reached the boat, each man was too exhausted to climb aboard. They just hung off the gunwale and sucked in sharp, salty breaths, feeling heavy like they'd been dipped in liquid cement.

"I'm glad you guys made it," Cook said, unsmiling.

"You too," Fabrini said.

"Thank God," Menhaus rasped.

Saks rolled his eyes. "All right, girls. You can make love later. Into the boat before something takes a bite outta you."

Cook helped pull each man into the boat. Saks was last. Cook pulled him aboard, but didn't like the idea. You could see that. The look in his eyes said it all. And Saks knew right then who was going to be trouble. Who was going to need his ass straightened out.

"Nice to see you, too, dumbass," he told Cook.

10

George could see nothing but the fog.

It was white and yellow and steaming, great congested patches of it blowing around the raft by a wind that he could not feel. Maybe it moved because it wanted to move. Maybe it was alive. Maybe it was intelligent and in that godawful place, the idea of something like that didn't seem quite so preposterous as it would have in the real world. Because this was not the real world. Not Earth. Not the Earth George had known. Maybe it was Altair-4 or Rigel-3 or one of those other quaint science fiction sort of places, but it surely was not Earth. Earth did not have fog like this. It did not have scuttling crab/spider things with too many eyes that could run across the water. It did not have big things with glowing green eyes the size of hubcaps. It did not have weird, trilling things in the fog that sounded like giant insects. And, no, it did not have a sea that was like pink gelatin clogged with rotting seaweed and it surely did not have this fog.

Fog that swirled and swallowed and fumed, was lit with that phantasmal, dirty radiance. The fog hid things, George knew, things that might drive you mad if you saw them. So that was good. But it also hid *you.* Wrapped you in its dusky winding sheet and tucked you into secret crevices and shadowy spider-holes you would never find your way out of.

"Does it seem brighter?" George said. "Not day-bright, but certainly brighter"

Gosling nodded. "Maybe this fog will burn away yet. Maybe."

"Still looks pretty damn thick, though," George said.

But it was lighter out. It had happened incrementally, so subtly that neither man had even noticed. Now it was not like twilight really, but maybe a gloomy, overcast morning. Well, maybe not that bright, but better. Much better. Even the fog itself didn't look so murky, so . . . polluted like seething fumes of toxic waste. You could actually see the ocean, that marshy run of steaming rot.

The surface actually seemed to quiver.

George dipped an oar into it, discovered there was actually sort of a sticky, scummy membrane over the surface . . . like the film over a pail of spoiled milk. That's how the scuttler — George had christened the creature on the oar that now — had dashed over it. No magic there, just adaptive engineering.

He figured that the day . . . or night or whatever it was . . . was brightening a bit and that was something.

Not that it really improved their situation much.

They were still, without a doubt, the proverbial needle in a haystack. Except the haystack in this case seemed to go on to infinity. And where that haystack was located . . . well, that was something else again.

Gosling was busy with the VHF radio, seemed impervious to just about everything else.

"You suppose we might get out of this?" George asked him.

"I don't know."

"What's your sailor's intuition tell you?"

"Tells me we're fucked," he said.

Gosling and his damn pragmatism. He didn't care diddly about keeping morale up; that wasn't his concern. He looked at everything realistically. And the reality of the situation with him was that either they'd live or die. He leaned in neither direction. What happened was what would happen.

"You know, that's what I love about you, Gosling, your optimism. It keeps my spirits high."

"I'm not your therapist. It ain't my job to keep you happy."

"Yeah, but I was on board *your* ship. Your boys steered us into this fucking netherworld. It seems to me it's your responsibility to get my ass out in one piece."

"Well, we get back, you file a complaint with the Coast Guard," he said. "Until then, quit yer goddamn complaining."

He kept fiddling with the radio, seemed more intent with it all of a sudden. He kept saying, *hmmm,* under his breath like a dentist deciding which tooth to yank. Regardless, it was driving George up the wall.

"You getting anything out there?"

Gosling shook his head slowly. "No . . . and yes. I thought before . . . thought I caught the end of a distress call, but it was swallowed in the static. I can't be sure. I'm thinking this fog might have some sort of electrical field to it, might be interfering with our signals."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Meaning it's distorting the shit out of the airwaves," he said, pulling the earplug out. "Could have been another broadcast, could have been ours coming back at us . . . hard to tell. That static swallows everything, vomits it back up."

George loved all that technical detail, but it didn't tell him shit. He knew radios. You turned them on to get the weather. Turned them off when Neil Sedaka or the Four Seasons came on. Other than that, he knew squat.

He got over closer to Gosling, listened to that static with him.

It was an empty, dead sound, rising and falling. Now and again there was a distant beep or ping. But you couldn't be sure. George kept listening to it, feeling like some astronomer with his radio telescope listening to the music of the spheres, the noise of deep space searching for an intelligent signal. Yeah, that's what it sounded like. Dead, distant voids and the echoing blackness between the stars.

He found it unnerving.

It was the sound a TV makes when a channel goes off the air and you're staring into that field of fuzz and snow. And if you stare too long, you start seeing shapes flitting about, the millions of dots and specs becoming patterns that pull you in . . . spirals and marching diamonds. But it's not there, none of it. Just the human mind offended by all that confused, random nothingness and deciding to fill in the blanks. Same way it did in deserts or snowstorms, creating mirages, images it needed to see.

George kept listening, certain he was hearing something . . . just not sure what.

Out there, in that storm of white noise, a man could get lost. He could sink away into blackness and lunacy. It would suck his mind clean until there was nothing but polished skull left behind. George decided that the static sounded like blowing dust and hissing gas, hollows and low places. A haunted, almost diabolic sound not of emptiness, but of *occupancy.* Like something sentient was out there, not necessarily alive nor dead,

but waiting, just waiting, listening and reaching out for minds to touch. It reminded him of recordings made by ghost hunters in tombs and desolate houses . . . static suffused with distant echoes, suggestions of awareness. Shades, shadows, ghosts.

"Hearing something?" Gosling asked him.

"I'm not sure." And he wasn't. Was it imagination or . . . or did something want him to think that?

"It's funny static . . . never heard nothing quite like it before. Those sounds in there, buzzing sounds now and again. You listen to it long enough you get the feeling . . ."

"That it's listening *back?"*

But if Gosling thought that, he would not say and maybe it was his silence that was the very worst thing of all.

He feels it, too, George found himself thinking, *he feels something out there, something listening, something cold and predatory . . . and maybe amused.*

But George knew he had to get off that track. For it was the road to dementia and once you started down it, you'd never come back. It was strictly a one-way street.

Gosling shut the radio off. "Nothing out there," he said. "Nothing at all."

George figured if the both of them kept telling themselves that, given time, they might even believe it.

He stared off into the fog like maybe he was waiting for it to show its teeth. "You don't have much hope for us, do you?"

Gosling shrugged. "I don't put much in things like hope or faith or luck. I used to hope for things, wish for things for all the good it did. Experience taught me otherwise. You make your own luck, I guess. I'm not saying luck doesn't exist. I'm sure it does. But not for me and probably not for you. Some people have it, most people don't."

George uttered a short laugh. "You can say that again."

They sat in silence, wishing they had something to smoke or something hard to drink. Anything. Humans loved their chemical dependencies and they never meant so much as they did in survival situations.

"Listen," Gosling said.

"I don't hear . . ." George began and then he did.

It was subtle, but it was there: a sort of tapping sound. And it was coming from under the raft. It wasn't a big sound like before when the raft had actually been lifted from the sea. This was nothing like that, this was more investigatory, probing, curious. George heard it down there, thinking with a chill that it sounded very much like fingertips scraping over the rubber. It started getting louder, bumping and squeaking, thudding.

"Jesus-"

"Shut up," Gosling warned him.

It ran up and down the bottom of the raft, creaking and bumping and scratching. Then it just touched now and again.

When it hadn't happened again for maybe five minutes, George said, "What do you suppose that was?"

But Gosling just shook his head. "I don't know . . . I just hope it stays gone."

11

Saks was watching the boys play, thinking that he had nobody to blame but himself. That he had hired this crew of mama's boys, dick-suckers, and all around morons.

The fog had brightened now and the boys were all excited that the sun was coming up, would burn off that fog and deliver the lot of them into never-neverland. They knew better. They all knew better. The fog was filled with a sort of illumination, sure, but to Saks it didn't look like sunshine at all, but more of a silvery moonlight that the fog tinted yellow. It was not a clean sort of light, but dirty like sunlight tinted through a yellow window pane.

What it came down to, he knew, was that it was all wrong.

Sure, it was brighter now. You could see people's faces, make out things just fine, but it was not what you'd call a sunny day. It surely was not normal.

After they'd reached the lifeboat and everybody had a bite to eat and some water, everybody chatted away and then one by one they'd fallen asleep . . . not realizing until that moment how tired they were. Saks himself had gone out hard, not waking for nearly five hours.

But he felt better now. On top of his game.

And his brain was firing on all cylinders again. For what he was thinking about as those idiots fooled with the fishing gear from the survival canisters, was not how *they* were going to stay alive, but how *he* was going to stay alive. How he was going to take control of this little party of stooges and make them work to his adavantage.

Saks was a natural at things like that.

Menhaus was rigging a lure with the sixty-pound test line. Since they didn't have any bait . . . any bait that could be spared, that was . . . Menhaus decided to use his watch since it had seized up now anyway.

"It's worth a try," he said. "I saw it in that movie."

Fabrini grunted. "Sounds fucking goofy to me."

"So let me do it. I don't need your help."

Menhaus was talking about something he'd seen in the film *Lifeboat.* The survivors of a shipwreck used a belt and a shiny bracelet as a fishing lure to try and catch fish. But they didn't have any real tackle, Menhaus pointed out, and that gave him a distinct advantage.

"I gotta see this," Fabrini said.

"Let's go fishing then," Cook said, happy that they finally had something to do other than watch Saks.

Saks was wondering exactly what they thought they were going to catch in that soup.

Crycek was up in the bow, had Hupp's head cradled in his lap as before. He watched the entire thing with glazed eyes. Maybe he was there and maybe he was somewhere else entirely.

Carefully, Menhaus lowered his makeshift lure into the water and jigged it like a real lure. He kept doing this, feeding out line, going deep with it. He kept at it ten, fifteen

minutes, adjusting depth, feeling around down there as he had as a boy for catfish while Fabrini told him how crazy it all was. But Menhaus kept it up, figuring it was a way to pass the time if nothing else.

"Anything?" Fabrini asked.

"I don't think so."

"Ah, shit, this is a waste of time."

"No . . . wait. I felt something."

The line jerked in his hands once, twice, three times. Menhaus gave it a good yank, trying to set the hook. Nothing. He tugged it, but there was no pull, no sensation of weight on the other end. But there had been something down there. Unless he snagged the hook on something. He fed out a little more line, jigged it carefully, again and again and again.

"There's nothing down there," Fabrini said.

Menhaus figured he was right . . . but then the line snapped taut in his hands, burning through his fingers. The sixty-pound test was heavy stuff and it cut bleeding valleys into his palms. He cried out and Fabrini took hold of it, too, smart enough to slide on one of the gloves from the emergency bin. He got a good grip on it and, Jesus, there was something big down there.

"We got a whopper here," he said. "C'mon, Menhaus, this bastard's fighting . . ."

Everyone was paying attention now.

Crycek's eyes were wide and unblinking.

Saks had narrowed his.

Cook looked mildly intrigued.

Menhaus got the other glove on his left hand and the both of them fought that line that whipped and snapped in the water, whatever was on the other end appreciating the meal of that shiny watch but downright pissed off that it was hooked to a line.

Fabrini had never done much fishing, but Menhaus was an old pro.

They pulled against their catch and then played out the line, kept working it that way, tiring out what was on the other end. After what seemed ten minutes of that, there was no more fight.

They started hauling it in.

Foot after foot of line was pulled into the boat, Saks reeling it in as the other two pulled. The nylon fishing line was stained pink from immersion in that moldering sea.

They were getting close now.

Fabrini kept looking to Menhaus, wanting to know what came next.

Menhaus had sweat beading his brow.

There was a sudden thump under the boat and then another and Menhaus directed the line out from under the hull. He directed their catch around the port side, leaning over the gunwale and trying to get a look at it. But the light . . . dirty alien light . . . only penetrated a few inches into that opaque sea.

But there was something there. Something pretty good sized.

"We're going to bring him up far as we can," Menhaus said. "Then I'll see if I can get a hold of him, pull him in."

Together, they brought their catch up until they saw a greenish-brown caudal fin that was broad like a fan of bony spines with a pink membrane connecting them. It

slapped against the side of the boat. Slipping on both the gloves now, Menhaus reached down and took hold of its tail just above the caudal. “Jesus, sumbitch is slimy . . . heavy, Christ . . . get ready boys . . .”

“Be careful,” Cook said.

With everything he had, Menhaus yanked it up out of the drink and it flopped over the gunwale and fell to the deck, not far from Crycek’s boots . . . which he quickly withdrew.

“What the fuck?” Saks said.

But they were all thinking that.

For it wasn’t a fish . . . exactly.

It was segmented like the tail of a lobster, twisting and gyrating, seemed almost boneless as it thrashed and sprayed slimy water in every direction. The men were falling over each other to get out of its way.

“You’re some kind of fisherman, all right,” Saks said, enjoying the other’s discomfort and horror.

It was maybe four-feet in length, the body reticulated and brown, oddly serpentine at the posterior end and thickening up to the width of a nail keg towards the head. There was something obscenely fleshy about it. It was a fish . . . yet not a fish. Like some weird, repellent hybrid of fish and crustacean. It was muddy brown at the tail and the color faded as it moved towards the head . . . or what might have been a head . . . and became entirely translucent like the body of a brine shrimp. You could see the shadows of pulsing organs and what might have been arteries.

The craziest thing, though, was that its head — completely eyeless as far as they could tell — terminated in dozens of snapping, whipping things like the barbels or whiskers of a catfish. But these were transparent as icicles, each ending in a blood-red needle.

What Saks was mostly aware of, though, was its smell . . . like rotting fish on a beach, high and foul and moist. But with a curious after-odor like cat urine.

“You brought it in!” Fabrini snapped at Menhaus. “Drag that fucker out!”

“I ain’t touching it,” he said.

“Keep away from it,” Cook warned them. “I don’t trust those whiskers . . . they could sting.”

Saks just watched it, wondering what sort of sewer of evolution it had wriggled from. Something like that . . . it had no right to live.

Its pectoral fins were spines like the tail, webbed with pink flesh, but the lower pelvic fins were something between fins and stubby walking legs. And back toward the caudal, there were tiny appendages which could have been nothing but swimmerets like those of a crayfish.

But for all of this, it seemed to be a fish.

Somehow. Some way. For it was incontrovertibly fish-like.

“Jesus Christ,” Fabrini cried. “Somebody kill that fucking thing!”

And they all wanted to, for it was so incredibly appalling that it offended them on some basal level. It was a horror. Something that had slithered out of the backwash of a primeval sea . . . snaking and undulating and disgusting. But nobody dared get near it.

Saks took up an oar, staring down at it, figuring it would be up to him to smash

this monstrosity.

It was dying now, he could see that much. Getting sluggish and dopey. It wouldn't last much longer. Each of those plates or segments were expanding to take in air, deflating again with slushy sounds. He figured it didn't have the normal forward gill slits of a fish, but that the openings between the segments must have been gills of some sort.

"Get the hell out of my way," he told Fabrini, moving around it with the oar.

Hupp was moaning, gagging, sounding like he was going to wretch. He slid out of Crycek's grip and Crycek let out a little cry . . . but too late. Hupp's leg got too close to the fish and those whipping barbels grazed the open flesh, leaving red vertical blisters like blood poisoning or burns. Hupp screamed and flopped and blood came from his mouth. His leg where the barbels had grazed it went blue as a blister, then black. Swelling up like bread dough. He shuddered and slumped over, dead as dead can be.

Nobody said anything.

Nobody did anything.

Crycek whimpered a bit, but didn't touch Hupp's body. Was afraid to, maybe.

Saks was watching that thing.

It had no eyes, but all those whiskers or whips were ringed around a flat, flabby gash further in which he supposed was a mouth. Each time the plates expanded to take a breath, that repulsive mouth yawned wide. There were things in there, maybe tongues but looking more like a nest of slender blue worms.

Saks figured then how this sucker hunted.

It used those wormy-tongues to lure in fish much as an alligator snapping turtle did with its own tongue. And once prey got past that flabby cave of a mouth, those whips would come in and seize it, inject it with some nerve agent that would paralyze it. For that's what those red thorns were: nematocysts, stinging cells like those of jellyfish. Those whips acted like the tentacles of a sea anemone . . . they captured and killed what the tongues lured in. Saks figured that might explain the thing's fins . . . they were like legs because it probably crawled over the bottom.

"You sure you ain't gonna filet this bastard?" he said to Menhaus and Menhaus stupidly shook his head as if it had been an option he decided against.

Saks stood near the fish . . . but not too near.

It was growing very still now. Even the whiskers were barely shuddering. And there was a ripe, decomposing stench wafting off it like a bucket of steaming entrails. Saks brought up the oar and smashed it down on the head. Those plates weren't as rugged as he first thought. The impact of the oar split one like a peanut shell . . . black, inky fluid oozing out. He brought the oar up and then down, crushing those barbels to paste. He kept hammering at it until it ruptured completely open, pissing a stew of meaty organs and black juice and vomiting out a bile of yellow jelly.

Opened up like that, it didn't smell too sweet.

Fabrini upchucked over the gunwale.

Menhaus was green as moss.

Cook, however, was unmoved by any of it. If he was anything more than offended by the fish, he would not let Saks see it. He sat in the stern, eyes hard as forged iron. Pale and pinched-looking, but nowhere near as bad as the others.

"Who's gonna clean up this fucking mess?" Saks asked. "How about you, Cook?"

Cook offered him a thin smile. “Not likely.”

“Well,” Saks said, dipping his oar in the water and washing it off best he could, “guess it falls to you, Menhaus. Be careful of them tentacle-things. They still can sting. Hurts like a motherfucker, too. Just ask Hupp.”

Menhaus looked like he was going to be sick, but he knew that he’d pulled the job. He brought the fish in and he would have to throw it back out. It took him a few moments to get his stomach under control, but when he did he went right over to the fish and, using the gloves, took hold of its tail and heaved it over the side. The fish bobbed there for a few seconds, then slowly began to sink.

“Wasn’t so bad, was it?” he said to them. “Goddamn babies. Just a fish”

But then all there was to do was think about Hupp’s corpse and what they were going to do with it. And nobody seemed to want to touch that one. No one but Saks. While the others looked at just about anything else, Saks eyed the handle of a knife sticking out of Hupp’s boot. Making sure no one was looking, he plucked it free and stuck it in his own boot.

Nobody seemed to notice.

Except Cook. He saw it, of course. But Saks flashed him a smile, just to let that sono-fabitch know that he had his number. That when the time came, he’d be punching his ticket.

“What about Hupp?” Fabrini finally said.

But got no reply.

So Saks said, “Looks like we’re a little shy on a good burying hole, so he goes over the side.”

“You . . . you can’t do that,” Crycek stammered.

“Why not?”

“Jesus Christ, Saks, we should say something,” Fabrini said.

“Okay, you’re right. Goodbye, Hupp.” Saks seemed to find it amusing. “There. I said something.”

“You’re an asshole,” Cook told him, meaning it.

Saks grinned. “Good, glad you feel that way. You can help . . . take him by the feet there. On the count of three . . .”

12

Since they'd gotten on the hatch cover, Cushing had heard it all again and again. Soltz had a nervous stomach, sensitive skin, arthritis in both knees, countless allergies, angina, myopia, a scalp condition, and was prone to gingivitis, bladder infections, and unexplainable pains in his legs. He was like a walking textbook of hypochondria. Back on the ship, he'd had medications for all these things-pills, salves, drops-but now he had nothing.

And he made sure Cushing knew it.

Cushing didn't know how much more he could take. Soltz was bad enough with his constant litany of complaints and ailments, but there were worse things happening than that. And the bottom line was that they were trapped in some terrible ocean and Cushing was pretty sure it wasn't a backwash of the Atlantic.

He kept telling Soltz not to worry. That the fog would lift and they'd be rescued . . . but how much longer could he keep that up?

"There really is no chance, is there?" Soltz said.

"Sure there is," Cushing lied once again. "Patience is the key. You just gotta be patient."

But Soltz looked defeated. "No doubt we'll be long dead before help arrives. If it ever does arrive."

"It will. It has to."

"I need water," Soltz moaned. "I think I'm dehydrating."

"You're not dehydrating. It takes longer than this to dehydrate."

Soltz fingered his balding scalp. "Maybe for you. I'm different."

"You're not different."

"Yes, I am. I always have been. I'm more sensitive to these things than most. To just about everything."

Cushing sighed. *How the hell did I end up with this guy?* he wondered.

"Soltz, why the hell did you sign up for this?" he asked. "I mean, why would a guy like you want to go down to South America and chop a runway out of the jungle for chrissake? It looks to me like day-to-day living is too much for you."

"Money. Isn't that why we all do things, Cushing? Isn't that why we all take foolish chances and put our lives on the line?" Soltz said to him. "Well, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Besides, I have high insurance premiums."

"You're kidding me," Cushing said. "A guy like you?"

"Oh no, it's true. I have terribly high insurance premiums. You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

Cushing buried his head in his hands as Soltz went into graphic detail about enlarged tendons and fluid being drained from his knee with needles. The only time Soltz seemed to be happy is when he was either complaining or discussing some medical procedure.

"I need water," Soltz said again when he'd finished making Cushing queasy. "I'm beginning to feel dizzy."

"You're fine."

"You don't know."

"Yes, I do, dammit. You're not dehydrated. Not yet. When your lips start cracking open and your tongue bloats up and turns black, then you're dehydrated. You're just thirsty now. There's a difference."

Soltz licked his lips. "Already my lips hurt."

Cushing gave up. If he wanted to think he was dying, who gave a damn? Let him think it. As long as he did it quietly and without drama, Cushing didn't have a problem with it. Right now, save for rescue, all Cushing could think of was his brother-in-law, Franklin Fisk. The same dumb bastard who'd organized this little party. And the very same bastard who'd drafted Cushing to go along as a spy. *A spy.* Jesus Christ, but it was hard to believe. Hard to believe that Cushing himself had gone along with it. Who gave a good goddamn what Saks was up to? If Saks was alive, floating around out there somewhere, and they bumped into him, Cushing was going to tell him the truth. And he wasn't going to stop there. This would be more than an admission. He was going to tell Saks everything he needed to take old Frank Fisk down. And nobody knew the Fisk dirty laundry like Cushing did.

The idea of this and only this made him smile.

Payback.

"What is that?" Soltz said.

Cushing looked. He saw clumps of yellow-brown weed floating in patches. "It's Sargasso weed, Soltz. It won't bite you . . . unless you get too close." He was thinking of telling Soltz the truth about it. That it was just seaweed, really, that collected in patches. That it was the mainstay of a colony of different creatures who used it for food, for shelter, for breeding. He was going to tell him about the tiny shrimp and chubs, the sargassum pipefish, the crabs and sea slugs, the eels that called it home. The larger fish that fed off the smaller ones in its shoots and tendrils. All the things he'd read about.

But was it the truth? Sure, it looked pretty much like pictures of Sargasso weed he'd seen . . . but was it? Cushing couldn't be sure, couldn't be sure about a lot of things in this place. Maybe being trapped in that winding fog made a man start thinking funny things, things he had no right thinking in the first place. Cushing didn't doubt that at all. But the sea . . . oddly pink or red-tinted, steaming and fetid and oozing . . . nobody could tell him that was normal. The air, the sea, the fog, everything was fucked-up and if the water itself wasn't exactly kosher — Cushing likened it to something drained from a stagnant tidal pool — then who in Christ was he to say that this was indeed Sargasso weed?

Yeah, it was all insane and it got under your skin and you could tell yourself all you wanted that it was some strange fogbank and a peculiar sea brought about by some atmospheric anomaly . . . but shit was shit no matter how you chewed it or dressed it up and you could only swallow so much before it came back up again.

"I've seen seaweed floating before, Cushing. I'm not stupid, much as it delights you to think so. I've never seen seaweed like that, seaweed that sparkles."

Well, he had something there. The seaweed *did* seem to sparkle. Maybe it was just a reflection from that damn fog. And maybe it had something to do with the day brightening up so that you could actually see things now. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Soltz said, “You know, I appreciate your lies, Cushing. You’re a good man to be concerned about my state of mind. But you don’t have to bother. I heard what those sailors were saying when we steered into that fog.” Soltz fixed him with those rainy gray eyes of his, held him like a bug on a needle. “We’re in the Devil’s Triangle, aren’t we? I mean, we’re in the place people call that. All those planes and ships and missing people . . . well, *we* know where they went, now don’t we? A patch of glowing fog sucked them up and spewed them here.”

“Don’t let your imagination run away on you, Soltz,” Cushing said without much faith.

“I saw a TV show about this years ago, Cushing. Vortices. That’s what they call these things. Vortices. They suck you up and dump you some place else. And maybe that place is just five-hundred miles away from your last position and maybe . . . yes, maybe it’s so far away physics couldn’t even measure it.”

Cushing didn’t have any spit left or he might have disagreed on general principles or for the sake of morale. But Soltz was on a run now and there was no slowing him down. He was spewing all the crap he’d sucked in about the Bermuda Triangle from years of pseudo-documentaries. Thing was, it all would’ve been casually amusing a week ago, but now? Anything but.

“I heard one of the sailors mentioning the Sargasso Sea . . . do you know what that is?” Soltz asked him.

“Just a big, becalmed seaweed sea in the Atlantic. Your Devil’s Triangle touches its boundaries. That’s the official take,” Cushing told him. “There’s also a mythical side to it the old mariners used to spin tales about. Seaweed everywhere. No wind, no nothing but weeds. Ships would get stuck there because there was no wind for their sails. But that wasn’t the worse part. The seaweed was so thick there ships would get stuck in it and never leave. The weeds would grow right over the ships and hold them there while the crews died of thirst. A ship’s graveyard.”

Soltz stared around nervously. “I guess that’s where we are then. See that’s how those tales started, Cushing. Men or ships must have been passed into this place, saw terrible things here, then passed out of it again and told the story.”

Sure, that’s exactly what Cushing had been thinking.

But to hear Soltz saying it without a shred of doubt, well it was disturbing, disheartening, something. He was right, of course. What other explanation was there? Cushing didn’t accept any of it lightly. He’d been fighting against the idea since before the ship went down, but step by step he’d been pushed into belief. There was no other choice.

“There’s things here,” Soltz said, almost too calmly, “things you won’t see other places. Terrible things. You know it and I know it.”

Cushing knew it, all right.

As yet, they’d had no encounters with what was in the fog, but they’d heard sounds . . . bad sounds . . . and Cushing knew it was only a matter of time.

Apparently, Soltz knew that, too.

13

On the lifeboat, it was pretty much the same thing:

"What is that shit?"

Crycek looked over where Saks was pointing. There was a clumpy expanse of yellow weeds, floating stalks and bladders. "Gulf weed," he said. "It's all over the Atlantic."

"Don't look like Gulf weed to me."

Crycek smiled. "No? What do you think it is?"

Saks said, "Hell if I know."

"Sometimes things look like one thing when they're actually another," Crycek said, just filled with mysticism or dementia . . . take your pick.

Which got Saks glaring at him. "No shit? And sometimes sailors look like men, but they're really pussies looking for their mama's tit. Ain't that right, Crycek?"

Cook sighed. Crycek was baiting Saks. He'd been baiting them all since Saks and his crew had climbed aboard the lifeboat. It was a game to him, you see. His mind was getting softer than a pumpkin two weeks past Halloween and now he was acting like a little boy with a dread, dirty secret. Only he wasn't going to tell, because that's not how it worked. So he just kept needling the others, hinting at dark things and unseen things and just plain awful things. Hinting, mind you, but never framing said terrors into words.

Crycek was not only losing it, Cook decided, he'd already lost it.

Hupp was dead now, tossed overboard under Saks's direction with all the ceremony of an emptied chamber pot. And that had been the catalyst, Cook figured. Only Hupp and caring for him had kept Crycek's oars in the water. Even then, he was on the verge of hysteria, but it had been something. Something to call his own. Something to balance out the madness. Now, however, there was nothing. And Crycek was giving into his dementia like a junkie giving into the needle, knowing that all things were eventual somehow.

Cook had been noticing that the clumps of weeds were getting more and more numerous now. The one in question Saks was studying was a little island easily six feet in circumference. And, no, it didn't look much like Gulf weed or any other weed Cook had ever seen before. It was a collection of matted, weedy growths, stalks and bladders, and white greasy-looking pustules about the size of teacups that looked very much like the caps of Death Angel mushrooms. And maybe the strangest and most disconcerting thing was it had a red jelly glistening on it like snot.

Maybe it was perfectly harmless.

Maybe.

"Hey, Fabrini," Saks said. "Why don't you jump in there and play with it? Take Menhaus with you. Maybe you two can catch a nice fish for supper. That last one . . . boy, now that was a real keeper."

"Why don't you piss up a rope?"

"You wanna suck on my what?" Saks said.

Menhaus laughed nervously.

Crycek just grinned.

Cook and Menhaus caught each other's eyes for a moment and they were both thinking the same thing: this was trouble. There was tension here. Something that might turn violent and bloody at any moment. A poisoned sore ready to burst, ready to spread infection throughout the body . . . the body in this case being the sum total of those in the boat. Maybe they were disguising it with this high school locker room banter, but there was bad blood between Saks and Fabrini. A potentially volatile situation brewing. Saks was staying in the stern and Fabrini in the bow, but sooner or later Saks was going to mouth off and Fabrini was going to be all over him. You could see it in Fabrini's eyes. The festering hate that was just waiting, waiting for the right moment like a tiger deciding when to unsheath its claws and open some bellies.

"Sure," Crycek said. "Why don't you touch that stuff, Fabrini? That would be interesting. What do you suppose would happen if you touched that stuff?"

But Fabrini wasn't having it. The smile on his face was like a paper cut, just a slit. You could see it in his eyes, how he was getting damn tired of Crycek, too. Was maybe thinking that after he punched Saks's fucking ticket he was going to do the same with Crycek, just keep it up, keep it up.

Menhaus said, "I just wish we'd drift free of this shit already."

"You hear that, Fabrini? Menhaus wants us to drift free of this shit already," Saks said. "What do you suppose the chances of that are?"

"About the same as you getting a personality," Fabrini said.

Which got Saks laughing. "You're great, Fagbrini, you're really great. Why didn't your old man shoot his load into the sink and save us all this grief?"

That almost did it. Fabrini's eyes went dark and simmering, like hot tar bubbling up from a crevice. He looked about as close to murder as anyone Cook had ever seen. But then that look melted from his eyes and that smile came back, only it was sharp enough now to slit a throat. "Keep it up, Saks. Just keep it up," was all he said.

"I always do. Just ask your mother."

Crycek was still grinning. He couldn't seem to lose that grin any more than a clown could lose one painted on his face. "Childish. You're both so goddamn childish. You sit and argue and call each other fucking names while we drift farther into the mouth of Hell. Because that's where we're all going, each and everyone of us, right into Hell. And you know what, Menhaus? We're never getting out. Never, ever." He started giggling with a high, jittery sound that seemed to have the same tonal quality as fingernails scraping a blackboard. "Just like . . . heh, heh . . . just like Alice in Wonderland, eh? We went through the looking glass and now there's no way out, no way at all."

"Shut up," Saks told him. "Goddamn freak."

"No, no," Fabrini said. "Let him speak. Let him get it off his chest. Maybe it's about high time somebody around here speaks what's really on their minds, really tells the truth." Cook said, "Everyone's overwrought."

"Shut up, moron," Saks told him. "Okay, Crycek. Spill it. You've been chewing on a bone ever since we came aboard, so out with it. What kind of crazy shit have you got for us?"

Crycek didn't like that. Didn't like being called crazy any more than a prostitute likes being called a whore. Because sometimes the truth not only hurts, it wounds, it

scars. “What bone have I been chewing on? Same one you’ve all been chewing on, except not a one of you has the balls to come out and admit it. You’re all scared, you’re scared fucking white and I know it. I can see it in your eyes. Shit, I can smell it on you. You’re all ready to piss your pants! Big tough construction workers scared like little old ladies of the dark! I love it! I just fucking love it! Look how I love it!”

Cook said, “C’mon, Crycek . . . take it easy for chrissake. We’re your friends here.”

That got Saks laughing. “Friend? I ain’t his friend, Cook, anymore than I’m yours. And I also ain’t his mommy and ain’t about to baby this goddamn pussy.”

“Jesus Christ, Saks,” Fabrini said. “Give the guy a break.”

“Kiss my ass, you dumb wop. And that goes for the rest of you fucking sissies. Jesus H. Christ. Not a man among you.” He looked over at Crycek, looked at him like the very idea of his existence disgusted him. “Go ahead, Crycek. Vent yourself. Have your little nervous breakdown. When you decide you’ve got the balls to slit your wrists, I’ll give you the knife. Hell, I’ll hold it for you.”

Cook was beginning to feel tense and uncomfortable now, too. It was like reality and sanity were sewn together and some crazy bastard was pulling the seams open. He felt alone and paranoid and vulnerable.

Maybe they all felt that.

For if there had ever been any camaraderie here, it had just gone black to its core. Saks was a big part of that, of course. He was the proverbial rotten apple, the seed of malice. Sure, he was everything that was wrong with the race, all the intolerance and selfishness and cheap hatred rolled into a big fucking mess that called itself a man. Survival situations, like war, brought out the best and worst in people. And there was no doubt where Saks fit in. He was vile and crude and callous, the sort of guy that would slit your throat for a crust of bread.

And wasn’t it just damn funny, Cook got to thinking, how trash like him always survived? Always lived another day to poison a few more minds?

But if any of Saks’s cruelty was intended to make Crycek fold up like a flower in a frost, it just didn’t work. “That’s what I like about you Saks . . . you’ve got the biggest mouth of the bunch. Thrusting your chest out and running the others down, big boss man, big tough guy . . . and you know what’s really funny about that? What’s killing me is that you’re the most scared of all. You hide behind that macho shit because inside you’re a scared little boy . . . we weren’t here to show off for, you’d be crying and sucking your thumb.”

Saks was pissed. And everyone thought he was going to read Crycek the riot act, go up one side and down the other and not miss much real estate in-between . . . but he didn’t. He just stared at him, stared with such intensity he could’ve burned holes through him.

Menhaus said, “Okay, Crycek, enough. Both of you, enough.”

Fabrini just looked puzzled by it all. “What’s this ‘through the looking glass’ shit . . . what the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Crycek, still grinning, said: “We aren’t in the Atlantic anymore. We’ve passed beyond, to another place. A bad place and you all know that. Just like Alice, right through the fucking looking glass . . . only this Wonderland, things aren’t so brightly lit, are they?

You can call it the Devil's Triangle or the Sargasso Sea or the Graveyard of Lost Ships . . . what does it matter? That fog grabbed us, vomited us out here . . . wherever in Christ *here* is. Another dimension, another planet, I don't know, but I do know one thing and that's that not a one of us is getting out. We're here to stay."

"Bullshit," Menhaus said, looking angry for the first time. "I don't buy that shit. Goddamn sailor's stories, that's all they are and you won't get me to believe it, no sir. How about you, Saks? You don't believe that, do you?"

Saks just looked at him. "All I'm going to say here is that wherever we are, whatever clusterfuck Crycek and his butthole sailors got us into, if we got here then we can get out again."

There was a simple child's logic to that and everyone felt it, understood it. Even Fabrini was nodding.

"There you go," he said. "What we got to do is stick together, stay alive until we sort this out. That's what we got to do."

"Exactly," Cook said.

But that only made Crycek start tittering. "Alive? *Alive?"* He looked at them all like they were nuttier than he was and maybe they were. He kept up that awful tittering, his yellow teeth chattering together as he did so. "Do you think what's out there will *let* us live? You've all seen things and so have I. Monstrous, evil things. Alien things. Out in that fog, out there right now, they're waiting, they're *listening* to us. Nightmares, that's what they are just as sure as this is Hell. Things with teeth and empty bellies and yellow eyes and-"

Menhaus slapped him across the face. *Menhaus.* Mellow, mild, goodtime, joke-telling, wouldn't-hurt-a-fly Menhaus. And he did it almost involuntarily. His hand just came up and swatted Crycek across the face and it was hard to say who was more shocked: Crycek or Menhaus himself.

"Good one," Saks said.

Crycek looked like he was ready to leap, ready to start swinging, but Cook held him back. Wouldn't let it happen. Wouldn't give Saks the satisfaction of letting the men go at each other like animals.

"All right," Fabrini said. "We all know there's crazy shit here, we're all on the same page. But-"

"But *what?"* Crycek said, practically raving now. "Don't you get it? Don't any of you get it? This fairy tale never-neverland we're in is like some kind of dumping ground. Things too horrible to exist other places end up here. Maybe things God doesn't want to look on or admit he created, things he's ashamed of. This is where they end up, in this fucking sewer. They live and breed and multiply here . . . in this damnable pit, this cauldron of filth!" He started cackling again, only now no one had the guts to stop him. His eyes were huge and bloodshot, his lips trembling, cords jumping at his throat. "Sure, this is the bad place. This is where the things are, the crawling, squealing things! Unborn things and inhuman things! Things without eyes, without souls! Slinking, slithering, creeping nightmares and they're out there right now! Can't you feel them in the fog? *Can't you? Can't you feel their hunger?"*

"That's enough," Fabrini finally said. "Jesus Christ, that's enough . . ."

But it wasn't enough. They'd goaded Crycek into this, they'd wanted it and now

they were getting it. They'd opened the can of madness and now he was shaking its contents all over them, wetting them down with the stinking, abominable, deranged reality of it as he saw it. "Those things . . . oh, Jesus, I can feel them hungering . . . they'll be coming for us. Don't you doubt that. None of you. Today or tonight they'll take another and then tomorrow night and the night after and the fucking night after that! They'll take us one by one and if you're the last one . . . God help you if you're the last one because you'll slit your own throat rather than look those things in the face, look 'em in the face alone"

His mind was gone and they all knew it, but the impact of what he said was inescapable. For they'd all seen things now. Heard things. Sensed things and imagined still others. And what Crycek was telling them was exactly what had been echoing through their minds.

"You think I'm nuts? That it? You think I'm nuts?" he put to them, shuddering and quaking, his eyes darting madly. "Sure. Why not? Why shouldn't I be? You give it a day or two and you'll be as fucking loopy as I am! Oh, yes, yes, yes!"

Saks hit his seat with his fist and everyone jumped. "That's it," he said. He pulled out the knife he'd taken from Hupp: a lockblade with a seven-inch blade. Everybody saw that steel and they saw what was in his eyes, too. "One of you guys . . . somebody don't shut this fucking nutjob up, so help me I'll cut his fucking tongue out!"

Crycek was beyond danger now. He just laughed and then tears rolled from his eyes. He made a whimpering sound that quickly turned into a more ragged, horrid laughter. "You think I'm crazy, Saks? Sure, sure, sure, hee, hee, hee, crazy I am! Fuck it! But I'll tell you people one thing and I'll tell you it only once: you're all in danger. And it isn't just the wildlife, either. It ain't just the things in the water, because this world . . . this zone or dimension or whatever in the Christ it is . . . it ain't no different from the one we're from. Because just like our world, this one . . . yeah, this one has a Devil, too."

That even stopped Saks from using his knife which he was actually getting ready to do. And Cook knew that no one was going to stop him, but this stopped him. This stopped everyone. This filled them with something cold and shifting and made them all look out into the churning fog and wonder if something was looking *back.*

Menhaus was breathing hard. "I just want to get out of here," he said. "I just want to get back home. That's all I want."

"Ask Cook," Crycek said, his voice dead and emotionless now. "Go ahead, ask him. Ask him why he's afraid to listen to the VHF, why he's afraid to broadcast on it. Ask him."

They were all looking at Cook now. But he just shook his head. "I don't know what he's talking about."

But in their eyes, all their eyes, he could see that they did not believe him.

Crycek said, "Tell them, Cook. Tell them why you don't like that static on the radio, how you can feel something out there, something *listening.* Go ahead, tell them."

"Shut up," Cook snapped.

"Cook doesn't have the guts to say what he's thinking, what he's feeling," Crycek said and his sudden, rational calm was even worse than his earlier hysteria. "Because he knows it's out there, just like I do. It makes a buzzing sound like . . . like an insect. And maybe it is an insect. But it's out there, believe that. Something cold and cruel . . . out

there in the fog, listening, watching us. It wants to eat our souls, it wants to devour our minds . . .” He held a finger to his lips. “Ssshh. Just. Listen. You can hear it out there, hear it *listening,* hear it *waiting,* feel it *thinking* about us . . . in here.” He massaged his temples. “It’s in here, in all of us, eating us from the inside with fear.”

And the thing was, they *were* all listening.

Listening to the fog and hearing distant things and things that were not so distant. Suggestions of movement. Whispers of motion. And underneath it all, a low constant thrumming sound like a generator on stand-by, waiting to power up.

For a long time after that, nobody said a thing.

But they were thinking things.

Things that were not good, especially trapped in that fog.

Things about the horrors in the fog and how they could be positively minor in comparison to an evil that was huge and cosmic and had come to eat their souls.

14

There were things in the fog and there were things in the minds of men and sometimes it was truly hard to say which was the worst. That which you could see and which could kill you . . . or that which remained unseen that slowly ate away your mind, your resolve, your sanity. And then, according to Crycek's psychosis, there was that forbidding third grouping: that which you could not only see, but what could see *you.* Could feel you. And to this *devil,* if Crycek was correct, flesh and blood were of only marginal interest. What it wanted were minds to fill with gnawing pestilence and souls it could eat raw and squirming.

George Ryan was not in the lifeboat and he didn't need to be, for he had felt this *other* and more than once. He could sense it on the VHF, something hidden in that static like a hive of wasps hidden in the trunk of a blasted oak. Something that used the static for camouflage or maybe was the static itself. Both, maybe, and neither.

The easiest thing to do was to tell yourself that you were being paranoid, imagining soul-eating bogies out in that draping fog. For imagining such a thing under such conditions was perfectly natural. For the human mind was like that, wasn't it?

If it had no answers, it created them.

It filled in the blanks so it didn't burn out circuits and relays trying to answer that which was ultimately unanswerable. Maybe there was no discarnate intelligence out there, no depraved puppet master working the strings. Maybe it was just nature, raw and ravenous and alien. Such a thing was entirely possible, George decided. But it did not satisfy that very human sort of logic that declared that there always had to be *someone* in charge, if not God then the Devil and if neither of them, something vile and nameless so above us on the evolutionary scale that it might as well have been a god.

Humans had need of such higher powers.

Maybe it was because our society was empirical, based on social pecking order and always had been. Everything had to have levels and classes, we decided, a food chain of sorts. And every food chain had its apex predator . . . the big guy, the boss man, the chief.

And in that awful void of fog and nightmares, well, there had to be one, too. It definitely was not man so it had to be something else. For the idea of a place existing, being left under the chaotic charge of old Mother Nature . . . that was not acceptable.

For every ship had a captain and there had to be one here, too.

Didn't there?

Well, didn't there?

Yes, George had been thinking these things, trying to root out superstitious fear with modern weapons like reason and hard-headed logic. He'd come up with a pretty good theory to explain away this theoretical Fog-Devil. But he had to. There really was no choice in the matter. If you didn't erect some kind of wall between yourself and the unexplainable, well . . . you were going to be in trouble. And especially here. George had gone through it for a time after hearing that phobic white noise. It had gotten to him. Gotten to him bad. Gotten to him to the point that he had pulled down inside himself, crouched down in his own cellar, hidden there, trying to be small and silent and safe like

a mouse avoiding an owl in some great, misting killing field. And there he had waited, scared and helpless, smelling the rubber of the raft and the dankness of his own soul. But paranoia found him even there, hiding in the shadows, told him that this . . . this *whatever* it was, could find him anywhere. That even then it could hear his breathing, smell the fear-sweat on him, sense the hot blood rushing through his veins and the electrical impulses threading the synaptic networks of his brain.

It was out there, thinking about him. Feeling him. Getting stronger and stronger on the sour bile of his fear.

It was then that George put it to bed.

He climbed out of the cellar and filled his lungs with that moist, musty air and pretended real hard that he could not feel *something* out there. It was easier that way. Through ignorance there was ascension, through self-denial there was purity. Because the only other option was gradual mental deterioration, a rabid and all-encompassing paranoia that would eat his mind right down to cinders and polished bone.

So, without a doubt, George did not need to be on the lifeboat with the others. He did not need Crycek's madness for he had enough of his own, thank you very much.

God, he thought, *what's it going to be like after two or three days? A week? A month?*

But he wasn't going there.

"It's funny," he said to Gosling, "how it puts everything in perspective." Gosling smiled. "It does that, doesn't it?"

"I mean, you blunder through your life taking everything for granted. You worry about mortgages and bills and money. You dream about all the things you'd like to buy. The lifestyle you'd like to have. Never once do you look around and think, 'hey, this isn't so bad. I've got a roof over my head, food in my belly, I can afford a few nice toys. It's a good life'. It's not until everything goes to hell that you appreciate it. What I wouldn't give for a lazy Sunday afternoon in my recliner, snacking and watching the tube. A nice cold beer in my hand. Lisa always makes a big dinner on Sunday — roast beef or fried chicken, all the trimmings. You know what I'd give for that now?"

Gosling said, "Just about anything, I'd imagine."

George sipped water from the cap Gosling handed him. Already they were on strict rations. "How about you? Do you appreciate what you have or do you worry about what you don't have?"

"I like to think I appreciate what I've got."

"But do you?"

"Not enough."

"Are you married?"

"I tried it once. Didn't work. I'm gone too much."

"Kids?"

"No. No time."

George thought it didn't seem like much of a life flitting about from one place to the next. No roots. No nothing. Just a lot of time to think while you were out at sea. It sounded lonely.

"When we get rescued," George said, "I want you to come over for supper, Gosling. I mean it. It'll be good for you."

“Maybe,” Gosling said. “Maybe I will.” He kept staring out the doorway of the raft. “What’s so interesting out there?”

“Look.”

George went over to the doorway with him, stared out into the fog and murk and saw it right away. It was brighter now, of course, and visibility was up to maybe two hundred feet or so. And that’s where George was seeing it, right where the mist became the water and the water became the mist . . . a series of luminous objects just beneath the surface heading in their direction. Whatever they were-they looked lozenge-shaped, a few feet in length each-there had to be hundreds of them and they were coming fast. More all the time.

“What the hell are they?” George asked.

Gosling just shook his head. “Something . . . I don’t know . . . like a school of luminous fish”

And there was no time for further discussion, for the school was closing in on them, moving just a few inches beneath the surface of the water and creating a surging, boiling swell in their wake.

Gosling zipped the door shut.

Eyes wide and panicked, they waited for the first impact.

15

Cook never took his eyes off Saks.

Crycek was crazy, of course, and Fabrini was trouble. Maybe Menhaus, too, and mainly because he was such a follower. But Saks . . . he was another story. Saks reminded him of his father. But unlike his father who had good days and kind words from time to time, Saks pretended to be nothing but what he was: a bully.

What they needed right now was a sense of unity.

The common enemy was this terrible sea. They could only survive if they worked together. Cook was no survival expert, but even he knew this. And the greatest threat to their unity was Saks. Not what lurked out in the fog or even this hypothetical devil of Crycek's. Just Saks. He would destroy the survivors much faster than any of those factors. He was a self-involved, self-indulgent macho bastard who would have fed his mother to the sharks if he thought it would keep him alive a few more hours.

If the others had risen up and decided to kill the man, Cook knew he would happily join in. But that wasn't going to happen. Not yet, anyway.

But if he was lucky, maybe in time.

And nobody was more patient than Cook because he knew Saks was a dead man, it was just a matter of when now.

16

"I'm so thirsty," Soltz kept saying. "I need water."

"You're okay. Just try to think of something else," Cushing said, scanning the fog with his bright blue eyes, looking for something, anything out there. Anything that might give him even the thinnest ray of hope. Because, Jesus, this was bad.

Real bad.

Cushing wasn't a pessimist by any stretch of the imagination, but there were limits to everything. Just the two of them, he was thinking, floating on that fucking hatch cover in that turgid, alien sea. What were their chances here? Death could come in so many different ways. And if it wasn't from some of the wildlife — he'd heard enough sounds out there now to be convinced that there was some seriously nasty shit prowling around-then what? Dehydration? Starvation?

Damn, but it wasn't looking real peachy right about then.

He hadn't slept in . . . well, he wasn't sure how long now. Since his berth in the ship. Every time his eyes started drifting shut, he snapped awake with the dread certainty that something was coming out of the fog, something was reaching out for him. Even when he was wide awake and alert, it was hard to shake that feeling.

He wondered if Soltz felt it, too. But he didn't dare ask him.

The man had enough anxieties to deal with.

"No boats will come here," Soltz sighed. "Not into this Sargasso Sea."

"I told you that's a myth. I was pulling your leg."

"I think we both know better, don't we?"

Cushing just shrugged. Okay, the kid gloves were off. No more trying to talk reason to the man . . . even if it was less like reason and more like out and out bullshit. Let Soltz believe they were lost in some alternate dimension, that they'd fallen through the back door of the Devil's Triangle.

Why not? Because they probably had.

"What is that?" Soltz said excitedly. "Look! What is that? A shark? A whale?" Cushing looked and saw nothing. "Where?

"There!" Soltz said, jabbing his finger at the water.

Cushing saw a gigantic shadow pass beneath them. Soltz, trembling, his jaw sprung open like a trap, moved to the very center of the hatch cover. Cushing crept out to the edge, tried to get a look at their visitor. It was a huge fish, at least forty feet in length. Its body a dusky brownish green speckled with white dots and darker transverse bands. It could have been a whale . . . except that as it passed, Cushing saw that its head narrowed into an angular probocis that was lit up like a Christmas tree, seemed to twist in the water, corkscrewing.

Crazy, impossible fish.

It swam off, did not return.

"It's just some kind of whale, I guess," Cushing said, not sure if he was relieved or terrified by the idea of something that size. "Harmless, I think."

"You think? Well, it didn't look harmless to me."

"It's gone. Don't worry about it."

Soltz stared out through his thick glasses. “You know a lot about nature, don’t you? The sea and its animals, things like that. How is it an accountant knows about things like that?”

“I’m a frustrated naturalist,” Cushing admitted. “I read books on everything. Sea life happens to be one of those things I’ve studied.”

“With my eyes, reading is a chore. I get headaches. Did I ever tell you about my headaches?”

Cushing figured he was about to learn all about them.

17

"Get ready," Gosling said and there was dire import behind his words. George said nothing.

He'd never felt quite so helpless before in his life. His knuckles were white as they gripped his knees. He was tense and waiting, his heart hammering wildly.

His throat was so dry, his voice would barely come. "I'm afraid," he admitted. "Jesus, I'm afraid."

"Stay calm," Gosling said.

The waiting, of course, was the worse part. Not knowing what was going to happen and when, if anything at all. George was now very much thinking about Lisa and his son Jacob and those pleasant Sunday afternoons. The worst part, the very worst part, about it all now was that he honestly didn't think he'd see them again. He'd never know another Sunday.

Just stay calm, he told himself. Just like Gosling says. That's what you gotta do. Stay calm.

Bullshit.

"They're almost on us," Gosling said.

But how he could know that with the door zipped shut was beyond George. Maybe he just *felt* it because George was feeling it, too, now: a gradual, almost lazy pressure building in the sea behind the raft. George was certain he could feel it coming right through the rubberized deckplates . . . a weight, an expectancy, a surging motion like air forced before a train. Right before impact.

There was no way to stay calm. Even Gosling didn't look so good. He was clown-white under his tan, his eyes jittering in their sockets like roulette balls. He was gripping the plank for dear life.

There.

George felt it and so did Gosling. Something or many somethings had just moved beneath them with such speed and power its aftershock actually lifted the raft up a few inches. The sea exploded with activity.

"They're under us," Gosling said.

And they were.

Dozens and dozens of those luminous fish or animals or whatever they were. They swam close to the surface and now they were bumping against the raft, one after the other. The funny thing was that their light — sort of a pale, thrumming green — filled the interior of the raft, actually lit the bottom like an x-ray so that you could see the outlines of the air chambers, every seam and stitch.

Yes, it was amazing. Truly amazing.

But neither George or Gosling had the time to truly appreciate it, for being in the raft was like being on a roller coaster. *Thump, thump, thump* in rapid succession. The sea boiled and the raft careened and George clenched his teeth down hard, waiting for those chambers to start popping and for them to start sinking.

But that it didn't happen.

The raft was engineered to handle rough seas and no amount of jolting and jarring

was going to pop it. That's why it was designed with a series of air chambers, rather than a single one.

Gosling had told him this and more than once, but George couldn't remember any of that. All he was seeing was that weird glow and feeling the raft beneath him in constant motion, spilling him this way and that, into Gosling and then back to the deck.

Then the bumping stopped and the glow went out as if somebody had switched off a lamp.

After a moment or two, Gosling went to the door and unzipped it. Nothing but the fog and the sea again, moving as one when they moved at all.

"Gone," he said. "And we're still here."

18

"Well, I'm hungry," Saks said, after a long period of silence. "What do you guys say we cut up Fabrini and have a snack?"

This elicited a low, dry laugh from Menhaus. Cook said nothing. Crycek just stared. Fabrini clenched and unclenched his fists.

"I mean, if this goes on for a long time," Saks went on, "we're going to have to eat someone. Fabrini's my choice. Let's face it, he's the most expendable."

"No, you're wrong, Saks," Fabrini said. "I'm too thin. What you want is some lardass. Like you for instance. A big, fat blowhard. A blubbery hothead that'll cook in his own juices."

Saks cackled. "You hear that, Menhaus? He wants my juices. All he ever thinks of is my dick."

Cook tuned them out. He was watching the fog, watching Crycek, and mostly just watching Saks. Crycek's diatribe earlier of some devil out there, waiting, was not lost on him. It seemed, that he could feel this other when he closed his eyes. Some presence nipping at the back of his mind. And maybe that was sheer imagination and maybe not, but there was a much more clear and present danger and that was Saks.

"Right now, food don't sound so good," Menhaus grumbled. "What I need is a cold beer."

"Shut up," Fabrini said.

"There's no point in talking about that," Cook said. "We have to be realistic."

Saks held his hands out before him in surprise. "Shit, was that you, Cook? Who rattled your cage? Let's be quiet, guys, he might speak again."

Cook narrowed his eyes. "I'm just saying we must be realistic here. There's no point in talking about beer. We'll have to get by on our survival rations until . . . until something else shows up."

"Well there you go," Saks said. "Mr. Realism has spoken."

"Oh, just shut up," Fabrini said.

"Why don't you go fuck your mother, Fagbrini?" Saks snarled.

Fabrini rose to his feet, the boat rocking slightly. "I've had as much as I'm going to take from you, Saks. You've been asking for this."

Saks grinned without mirth. He stood up slowly, knowing that he *had* been asking for this. He'd been trying to push Fabrini to violence ever since the ship went down. And the fact that the moment had come gave him no end of satisfaction. He liked to be able to manipulate people. It gave him a feeling of power knowing he could push the right buttons and get someone to act accordingly. Like Fabrini, for instance. Hotheads were the easiest to control.

"Stop this," Cook said. "You can't fight in the boat."

And in his brain he was trying to think of a reason why they couldn't. Because it was wrong? Because it was immature? Because they might tip the boat? But, no, none of that was what he had been thinking at all. It had been something a little higher and a little mightier. They couldn't fight because, dammit, they were men, they were both men and that had to count for something. For men were a rarity in this new savage world and if

indeed there was some malefic devil out there, some puppet master, then they had to stick together. Had to show this thing that men always stuck together, always presented a unified front against adversity.

Sure, maybe it was all a little idealistic, a little pretentious, but Cook figured it was important. They could not allow themselves to become puppets, playthings, amusement for something wicked and inhuman. For negativity amongst their numbers made them weaker . . . and made *it* stronger.

"Please," he said to them, "just stop this. Don't you see what you're doing?"

But they didn't and continued to hurl insults back and forth, most of which were getting damned unfunny by this point.

Crycek said, "You should listen to Cook. Maybe some of you don't know, but Cook? Oh, he knows, all right. He knows what's out there, what waits for us. Divide and conquer, that's what it's doing. It feeds on fear and hopelessness and anxiety, violence and anger . . . and you're feeding it. Oh, you certainly are. Filling its belly with your filth, making it strong . . ."

Crycek launched into another of his insane sermons about this mythical other who watched and waited and listened, amused, constantly amused. That both Saks and Fabrini were idiots because they didn't really want to fight, that they were being manipulated by this thing, that it was in their heads seeding their actions. Crycek told them that they had to fight it, force it out of their minds . . . didn't they see? *Didn't they see anything?*

Cook knew Crycek was crazy, but that didn't necessitate that he was wrong. Because Cook himself had been thinking along those lines. What if they were being manipulated, forced into this? Sure, they were both idiots when you came down to it, drowning in their own testosterone, and this is exactly how you'd figure they'd act. But what if Crycek was right?

Cook thought: *It makes sense, doesn't it? This thing, this devil, it would go after those with weakest minds, those it could bend the easiest. Saks and Fabrini might be physically strong, but mentally—like all such men—they're simplistic, simple-minded. Everything's black and white and minds like that are the easiest to exploit . . . that's how countries got men to go to war, by exploiting their base instincts. This thing would know that. It would know the weakest psychological links instinctively . . .*

Mind control . . . Jesus.

"Both of you stop it," Cook said, trying one last time.

They both ignored him, edging closer by the moment.

Menhaus opened his mouth to say something, then closed it once more. He slipped around Fabrini to the bow and sat beside Cook.

"This is madness," Cook said. "Grown men acting like this! We are in a life and death situation here and-"

"Let 'em go, " Menhaus said, enjoying it immensely. "Let 'em get it out of their systems."

Like a boxing match or a football game . . . Menhaus was relieving his own tensions and frustrations vicariously. These two were his pressure-release valve.

When they were a few feet apart, Saks stopped smiling. "Okay, you little shitfuck, let's see what you got."

The words had barely left his lips when Fabrini made his move. He swung

roundhouse at Saks and Saks ducked under it easily. He came up quickly pounding Fabrini twice in the face with tight, economical jabs. Fabrini did not go down. He lunged forward with a stumbling grace, blood running from his nose, and tackled Saks. They both went down in the stern, the boat rocking wildly. Saks fended off two punches and took a third and fourth in the face. Fabrini was swinging like a man possessed. Very few of his blows found their intended target, but those that did were devastating. Saks was being battered badly. He got his foot in Fabrini's crotch and kicked out with everything he had. Fabrini cried out and, arms flaying madly, went over the side of the boat.

Cook and Menhaus went to his assistance.

Saks wiped blood from his face. "Leave the bastard!" he howled.

But Cook and Menhaus were already pulling him onboard. "He was bleeding in the water," Cook kept saying frantically. "He was bleeding. In the water."

But the import of that was lost on Saks. "Yeah, and he's going to bleed a lot more," Saks said, coming at them. He had a knife in his hand. The same one he'd pulled from Hupp's boot. Before anyone could hope to stop him, he slashed out with it, taking off the top of Fabrini's left ear.

Somebody shouted. Maybe Cook, maybe Menhaus.

Fabrini didn't seem to know what was happening. A look of rage swept across his features followed by one of dazed confusion and finally pain. His hand went to his ear, blood gushing between his splayed fingers. He saw the knife, felt the warm wetness course down his neck and started to scream, crawling away towards the bow on all fours.

Menhaus tripped over one of the seats trying to get away from the glinting silver of the knife. "Oh shit," he gasped. "Oh Christ."

Apparently, Menhaus didn't like it when his thrills spilled over in his own lap.

Cook stood his ground, his eyes like shining metal balls. "Give me the knife, Saks," he said in a low, hard voice. "Give me that fucking knife!"

Saks cackled, blood running down his chin from a split lip. "You want the knife, fuck-face? *You want the fucking knife?"*

Cook knew he was in a dangerous position. He could see the raw animal rage in Saks's eyes. It was like fire and rusting metal. The man was about as close to insanity as anyone he'd ever seen. Anyone save his father.

Saks slashed at him with the blade, driving him back. "You be good, asshole, you be real good," he panted. "You get over there with your buddies or I swear to God I'll slit you open."

Cook backed away slowly, hands held out before him peacefully. "Sure, Saks, sure. We don't want no trouble here. You just relax and keep cool."

"Oh, I'll be cool, shitbag, don't worry about that," he said, still smiling like a skull in the desert. "Just as long as you do what I say. Otherwise, heh, there's things out there . . . hungry things. You know what I'm saying?"

In the bow, Cook found Fabrini splashing water on his ear. Washing blood from it and his neck, but also putting blood in the water.

"You idiot," he said. "Stop it."

"What?" Fabrini said. "What?"

"You're getting blood in the water."

"What of it?" Fabrini said.

“The blood,” Cook said breathlessly. “Sharks can smell it in the water.”

He didn’t need to say more. Nobody was really worried about sharks, but there was bound to be other things. Worse things. Hungry things, as Saks had said.

Menhaus licked his dry lips. “I think you’re right.”

Cook decided he’d better derail that one. “Besides . . . this water . . . it doesn’t look real clean to me. You might get some sort of infection from that slop.”

He got out the first aid kit and bandaged Fabrini’s ear for him, sprayed a little disinfectant on it. Fabrini complained, but he wasn’t too bad about any of it. Which got Cook to thinking that there was hope for him. The fact that he hadn’t tried to grab an oar or something and go at it with Saks, proved there was something very human in him.

But Saks?

No, he was too far gone.

19

"Right there," George was saying. "Do you see it . . . right over there . . ."

Gosling was looking through the doorway with him and he saw it, all right. Tangled in a mass of weeds, something bright orange. Looked like styrofoam. He was thinking it might have been an EPIRB tube that had floated free of the ship or one of the lifeboats. At least, that's what it kind of looked like.

"What do you think?" George asked.

Gosling figured it was worth checking out. "Help me unzip the canopy."

The canopy was zippered to the inflated arches of the raft. Together, they began taking it down. Maybe it put them at risk, Gosling was thinking, but it was nice not being enclosed in the canopy. To feel the air again . . . even if it did smell like something mossy and rotting.

Gosling passed out oars and they began rowing over there, feeling the drag of the sea anchor behind them. The weeds were growing more numerous and none of that had escaped Gosling's attention. Before, there had been little drifting clumps, an occasional island, now the islands were getting more numerous. They rowed on, parting the mats of weed, moving towards their target.

When they were maybe six feet away, Gosling saw the orange of an EPIRB. "Just a radio beacon," he said. "We already have two of them."

"Fuck it," George said. "Let's just keep rowing. Feels good to be doing something."

Gosling figured he was right. It did feel good. And maybe, just maybe, with weeds becoming more concentrated it meant they were nearing some landmass. Maybe.

So they rowed and watched the weeds, the tendrils of steam wafting off the water, the heavy fog shimmering and glimmering. It felt good to put their muscles to work.

George suddenly said, "What the hell?"

He was yanking on his oar, managed to free it. He studied the end and began rowing again. Gosling figured he'd caught it on the weeds, paid it little mind . . . until something seized his oar. Held it tight.

"I'm caught on something," he said, struggling with it, trying to pull it up and out of the mire. He managed to work it free of that dark, sluicing water a few inches and then it was *pulled* back down again. No, it surely wasn't weeds, it had to be-

There was a thump under the raft. And then another. A rubbery scraping sound that made Gosling's hackles rise. It was like the sound they heard earlier, a sort of slow investigative motion. More scraping, another thump. Then something down there hit the raft hard and it lurched to the left.

"Christ," George said.

He had his oar out of the water by then and Gosling gave his a yank and there was nothing holding it. They sat silently, waiting for what would come next for they both knew something would. Something was about to happen here. They were froze up, looking at each other, the sea.

There was a ripple of motion just beneath the surface on the port side. George's side. Then another. He let out a little involuntary gasp and then water sprayed up and over

him like he'd been hit by a big comber.

And then something big moved in the water.

Gosling caught a quick glimpse of something dark and shiny-looking, like oiled rubber.

"What in the hell?" George said, moving away from the gunwale, maybe feeling whatever it was in his mind and not liking it at all.

Gosling was thinking about a weapon, something other than the wet oar in his hands when another gout of water splashed into the boat and George cried out and . . . and something huge and serpentine came winding out of the drink. It was big around as a man's thigh, brown and leathery, with a long snaking body and a huge, eyeless head that looked bony and plated. It had a mouth and it was a big one.

George ducked down as it snapped at him, darting its head in his direction like a python trying to snatch a rat. The head was about the size of a mailbox, set with a hinged jaw that allowed the mouth to open wide enough to take hold of a man's head.

Gosling hit it with his oar and then hit it again.

It backed off, slid under the water and came back up again.

It lashed out at where it thought the men were, but it was blind. Completely blind, something engineered to haunt the black depths far below. It looked, if anything, like some immense moray eel. Its body in the water was coiling and twisting. Gosling figured it had to be fifteen or twenty feet in length. It had fins like an eel and that awful length of corkscrewing, boneless body. There were bright yellow gill slits set just behind the head. It hammered into the raft with its head and body, not sure what to make of it. Every time those jaws came open, Gosling could feel a rush of hot, briny air

George was dodging that swooping head, swinging wildly with his oar. *"Get it the fuck away from me!"* he cried out.

Both he and Gosling kept cracking it with their oars.

If the situation hadn't been so terrifying, it might have been comical. For the eel, or whatever it was, might have been a slick, evil predator in that slimy sea, but above in the open air it was clumsy and drunken, seemed to have no true equilibrium whatsoever. It nudged the sides of the raft again and again with its nose, then seemed to lose balance and rolled in the thrashing water, flashing a pale speckled belly at them. Its fins fanned out like the wings of a bird, but could get no purchase in the air.

Growing tired of the games and obviously getting winded if those gasping, fluttering gill slits could be any indication, it yawned its jaws and took hold of the port gunwale, began to shake it.

Gosling cracked it over the head until it let go, seeing gladly that there were no punctures in the rubber.

The creature slid back into the water to suck in some air from that filth no doubt. But it wasn't gone. They could hear it under the raft, bumping and squeaking along.

Gosling pulled a flare gun from the survival equipment, thinking that the beast, the worm, whatever it was, reminded him of gulper eels that fishermen sometimes pulled up in their nets. It had that same undulating body and oversized head and like many creatures from the abyss, it looked like something from a B movie out of the water.

George was in the stern now, breathing hard, soaked and staring, oar raised.

"Come on, you prick," Gosling said, tensing.

And then it did, it shot up out of the water, jaws wide and Gosling moved fast. He brought up the flare gun and fired a flare right into its mouth and maybe down its throat for all he knew. There was a sudden explosion of light and red sparks from inside its mouth and it began going wild, shaking its head madly back and forth, pissing sparks and smoke and the stink of burned flesh.

Then it dove back into the water with a hissing sound.

That was it.

Five minutes later, it still had not come back.

When he was able to catch his breath, George said, “Let’s put that fucking canopy back up.”

“Yeah,” Gosling said.

20

Saks kept his eye on his "friends."

He watched them like a mother bird watches a nearby snake. He knew and knew very well what they were thinking. He knew what kind of plots were even now hatching in their brains. They were all fantasizing about overpowering him, about killing him or throwing him overboard to . . . to those hungry things. Maybe not all of them. Menhaus was too chickenshit to try something like that and Crycek was just a basket case. But the other two? Oh yeah. You could bank on it.

Fabrini and Cook. They were going to be trouble. They were going to try and take the knife.

But it was going to be a cold day in hell when that came to pass.

"I wonder what's out there?" Saks said almost jovially. "What kind of things . . . bad things, I bet. Just like Crycek said. Things with teeth that can smell blood in the water. Like that thing we heard eating those guys in that other boat. Remember that? The way it sounded . . . those chomping, tearing sounds. You remember that, Menhaus? Awful sounds, eating sounds, bones crunching."

"All right, Saks," Cook said. "That'll do."

"No, I don't think so. See because I'm just wondering who's gonna be first to fill their bellies."

"Maybe it'll be you," Fabrini said.

"Not likely."

"Hey, Saks," Menhaus said, "why don't you just stop this shit? Just call it quits right now. What do you say?"

"Sorry. Don't think it'll work. First time I set this knife down, your buddies there'll kill me. They'll take this knife and slit me up for bait. Isn't that what you're thinking, Cook? Feed old Saks to the monsters in the mist. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Listen," Cook said. "The last thing I want to do is hurt anybody. We need each other. Can't you see that?"

"I only see that you're a liar."

Saks kept staring, taunting them with the knife. He really wished they'd try something. They'd find out good and fast just how handy he was with a blade. He'd killed two slopes in 'Nam with one and he hadn't forgotten a thing. Just let 'em try. Slash, slash. He'd get one of them across the eyes, the other in the belly. Then he'd feed their sorry asses to those horrors out there. Menhaus, he knew, wouldn't be one of them.

"Anytime you pussies feel man enough," Saks said, "you just come and get me. I'm right over here. Here and waiting. I think you're in for a world of hurt, but you're more than welcome."

"You gotta sleep sometime," Fabrini said.

"Oh, but I'm a real light sleeper, Fabrini."

And that's probably what they were planning, Saks realized. They were waiting for him to nod off. That's when they were going to do it. Had it all planned, sneaky little fucks. They were playing it safe right now. Acting all inoffensive and harmless to put him

off his guard. But it wasn't going to work.

He'd kill anyone who got close to him.

"Yeah, I'm a real light sleeper," he told them in a dry, menacing voice. "I hear anybody creeping around by me, well, I just start slashing. And I don't care which one of you sweethearts dies."

Let 'em suck on that, Saks thought.

"I hope it's you, Fabrini, I sure do. You see, you and me aren't done dancing yet. Not by a long shot. You can bet on that. You can swear to that on the grave of that dick-sucking whore you call a mother."

"You sonofabitch," Fabrini growled.

Cook held onto him, restraining him. But he made no real effort to get at his tormentor. Fabrini had a bad temper, a violent temper if you cornered him, but he was no fool. Saks was crazy and you didn't mess with a crazy man holding a knife.

Saks laughed at it all.

Oh, Fabrini was a gem. Just a real fucking pearl. You push button A, he gets pissed off. You push button B, he wants to beat your brains in. Button C, he's your buddy. Just a dumbass robot. If it weren't for the other two holding him back, he would've been a dead man by now.

"Let him go," Saks said. "You know that sooner or later he's going to try it. Sooner or later he's going to do something stupid and I'll have to kill him. Let's get it over with. Fucking shitrat like him is a liability to you guys. To all of us. C'mon, Fabrini, be a hero."

He didn't move and Saks giggled.

"About what I expected from a wop."

"Enough already," Cook said.

"Quit it, Cook. Quit with the voice of reason here. You ain't fooling me," Saks said. "I got your number. I know a scheming killer when I see one. Oh yeah. I know you. I know what you're all about."

"C'mon, Saks," Menhaus said without much effort.

But Saks just smiled. Smiled and waited for them to make their move. Because, sooner or later, they would. And Crycek could go fuck himself, because you didn't need no devil to make men act like animals. It was their nature.

And Saks knew it.

21

Cushing couldn't believe it when the raft came into view.

He looked and looked again, squinting beneath that dome of sparkling, angry mist, certain what he was seeing was a mirage. But it was no mirage, because Soltz saw it, too. It was real enough and so were the men waving from it.

No, it wasn't rescue as such, but at the same time after countless hours on a hatch cover, that's exactly what it was.

"I guess . . . I guess we won't die on this hatch cover after all," was all Soltz could say, cheated out of his whiny, dramatic death once again.

Quickly then, they began paddling over to the raft.

When Cushing first saw it, that shape come drifting out of the mist . . . he thought the worst possible things, of course. Although he couldn't see exactly what it was — just a shadow moving against that field of yellow and gray — he started imagining plenty. Was certain that whatever was out there was about to show itself.

That was what he had originally thought.

And sometimes in life, it was just damn great to be wrong.

When they got up near the raft . . . or it got up near them . . . Cushing saw George Ryan and Gosling, the first mate of the *Mara Corday.* It was the best company he could have hoped for.

"You're late," was the first thing George said to him as he hauled him aboard, up the little boarding ladder. "Least you could have done is called. Was that asking too much?"

Cushing laughed. Laughed loud and full like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard and maybe it was. It got him an odd look from Gosling, like maybe he was losing it, but that was okay. After all those hours on that hatch cover listening to Soltz bitch, a man was allowed a certain level of joyful delirium. And Soltz, true to form, complained the entire time Gosling yanked him aboard.

The raft was big and roomy, Cushing noticed, and could have accommodated a dozen men without crowding. That was a good thing because what he needed more than anything else was to stretch his legs without fear something was going to nip one of them off.

After George had given them a quick encapsulated version of the plight of himself and Gosling, leaving out certain unpleasant experiences concerning giant eels and luminous fishies, Soltz began.

"We must've drifted for days," he told them, wiping his glasses against his shirt. "It had to be at least that long . . . an endless fever is what it was. Just a blur for Cushing and me. Yes, I was pretty certain that we were nearing our last breaths."

Gosling was just staring at him.

When he was done doing that, he looked at Cushing as if to say, *is this guy for real here?* But the look Cushing gave him back assured him that, yes, this was Soltz in the flesh. The weakest link? Yeah, and then some.

After they had some freeze-dried food and water that tasted a bit brackish after being stored in plastic bags, the novelty of their new position wore off some, at least

enough where they could relax and discuss things in depth.

And after it was hashed-out, what was really to be said? They didn't know where they were or if by luck or providence they'd ever find their way out.

"About all we can do is take it day by day," Gosling said. "What else is there to do?"

He was right and they all knew it.

Except maybe Soltz. "What we have to do, I think, is accept that we're lost far from home, in an ocean I don't think exists on any map."

"He thinks we're in the Devil's Triangle or something," Cushing added.

"No, not exactly," Soltz pointed out. "We *were* somewhere like that. But that fog reached out for us and dumped us here, in this place . . . wherever this is."

Gosling just studied him. "What do you mean it reached out?"

"I mean it took us, transported us somewhere else. I don't know . . . another plane or dimension, call it whatever you want," he said to them, eyes huge behind his spectacles. "I know it sounds impossible and far-fetched and you all probably think I'm crazy or having a nervous breakdown. Please yourself. Think those things all you want, but down deep you know I'm right. This is the Twilight Zone. This place is neither here nor there, but caught in-between, a world or dimension stuck in the mist and shadows. Nothing's right here. Nothing'll ever be right."

It was all very sobering stuff, of course, but nothing they hadn't all been through in their minds dozens of times.

"Don't get carried away," Gosling finally said.

"I don't think I am. I think, given the circumstances, I'm being entirely realistic. This fog is not right. The sea is funny. Even the air . . . have you noticed, that even the air feels-"

"Like it isn't put together right?" George said. "Too thick or too thin, too moist or too dry. But too damn *something.* Yeah, I think we've all felt it. Like . . . like maybe the atoms are turned inside out."

They looked at each other for a time after saying that, nobody speaking at all.

Finally, it was Cushing who broke the silence. "Well, I tell you boys something. This place is fucked-up. We all know it. And I think it's a dangerous place, too. But the fact is that something pulled us in here and I'm willing to bet that whatever it was, can throw us back out again. Any time it chooses."

22

The first thing Saks realized was that he was looking at a body.

"Hey, you guys," he said, deciding just this once not to insult any of them. "We got ourselves a floater over here"

The four of them peered anxiously into the water. The body was floating face-down. Its clothing was burst open due to bloating, the flesh brilliantly white and puckered obscenely. As it drifted closer, they could see it wore no lifejacket.

"It's got fatigues on," Fabrini said. "What the hell would a soldier be floating out here for?"

"Same reason we are," Menhaus said.

"Maybe a troop transport went down," Cook suggested.

And that got Crycek going on one of his conspiracy theories again. This one concerning the military toying around with technologies they did not understand like children with their fingers on remote controls, having no true conception of what doors they might be opening or what things or forces they might be waking up.

"What the fuck are you babbling about?" Fabrini put to him.

But Crycek just giggled. "Yes," he said. *"Yes."*

Fabrini looked to Cook for a translation, but Cook just shrugged. He knew very well what Crycek was taking about, of course, but he wasn't about to launch into some half-baked diatribe concerning Crycek's theory about the military trying to smash holes into other dimensions. Maybe it was true and maybe it just belonged up on that dusty high shelf along with the Philadelphia Experiment.

"All of you shut up," Saks said. "Quit listening to that fucking monkeyskull. He's crazy, that's all."

When they drifted close enough, Saks stuck his knife in the web belt around the soldier's waist and pulled him or her or it to the boat.

"Menhaus, get your thumb out of Fabrini's ass and lend a hand here," he said. "The rest of you . . . stay put."

Fabrini and Cook eyed him coolly.

Crycek grinned.

"What're you girls staring at?" Saks said. "Find something to do. Go shave your pussies or something. Jesus Christ, what a bunch." He shook his head. "Soon as our backs are turned, Menhaus, they'll be pumping each other. Got that look in their eyes. It's a big day for both of 'em. Soon as Fagbrini gets home, he'll be writing, 'Dear Diary, Cook shot his load into me. It was the greatest day of my life since I blew Liberace.' What a guy, what a guy."

"What the hell do you want me to do?" Menhaus said, looking at the soldier's corpse. "Jesus, what a stink."

"Just hoist him up, bright boy."

"Me?" Menhaus said.

"No, the gay midget in your pants. Yes, you. Maybe Sergeant York's carrying something we can use."

"C'mon, Saks, he's rotten," Menhaus whined.

"So's Fabrini's asshole, but that never stopped you before."

Cook said, "C'mon, Saks, push that body away . . . it might attract something."

"Yeah, we don't want that," Menhaus said. "We don't want something coming for it."

Saks scowled. "Just grab him under the arm. He won't bite you."

Fabrini laughed and shook his head. "Why don't you do it, big chief?"

Saks features were cut by a knife blade smile. "Because I told Menhaus here to do it, dipshit. And like you said, I'm the big chief."

Fabrini cracked a fart. "There's one for you, big chief"

Menhaus saw it was a no-win situation. Pale as flour, he took hold of the corpse under the arm and lifted. It seemed to weigh hundreds of pounds. The flesh was spongy beneath the fatigue shirt. "Oh, God," he gasped, breathing through clenched teeth, turning away from the sick/sweet stink of putrescence. "Oh my Christ . . . oh my God . . ."

The body was lifted a few feet out of the water, a great fleshy, waterlogged balloon. Its face had been chewed away by fish . . . or something like fish. Nothing there but a grisly hollow of bleached muscle and knotted cartilage. Lipless, skinless, it grinned with jutting yellow teeth set in withdrawn, shriveled gums the color of oatmeal. Water ran and dripped from the empty eye sockets and collapsed nasal cavity.

Saks paid no attention.

He felt along the huge, distended belly, ignoring the whimpering of Menhaus and the parasites that clung in twisting loops around the navel. His fingers found something and pulled it free. A gun. Sunlight winked off its cruel metal lines. Dread settled into the faces of Cook and Fabrini. A three-inch worm slid like a greasy noodle from the cadaver's mouth, wriggling in the light.

"Oh, good God," Menhaus said.

There was a sudden wet, ripping noise followed by a fleshy snap and the body slapped back into the water. The arm had pulled free of the shoulder joint. With a strangled cry, Menhaus dropped the limb and vomited over the side.

"You don't need that gun, Saks," Cook said.

"Oh, yes I do," he said, grinning proudly, happily, like an old man who'd copped his first feel in years. "Nice, isn't it?" He waved the gun around for all to see and admire. "A Browning nine millimeter auto. Nice weapon."

"Shit," Fabrini said. "Thing's been soaking for days. It won't shoot."

Saks smiled and aimed the barrel just left of Fabrini's head and pulled the trigger. The report was like thunder. Fabrini felt the bullet whiz by his temple. The shell casing hissed into the water.

"You stupid fuck!" Fabrini shouted. "You stinking stupid fuck! You could've killed me!"

Saks chuckled. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead now."

Menhaus just looked ill. Cook looked alarmed, hopeless. He knew very well that the balance of power had shifted even further in Saks's direction. This was not a good thing.

"Big tough man with a gun," Fabrini grumbled.

Saks aimed the Browning square between Fabrini's eyes. "This time you die."

"Stop it," Cook said. "This is crazy."

"Yeah, c'mon, Saks. We're all friends here." Menhaus' smile was trembling and quivering like an earthworm desperate to get out of the sunshine.

Fabrini spat. "Go ahead, tough guy. Shoot." He said this with a strong, even voice. But underneath he was scared shitless and they all knew it.

"Saks," Cook said.

Saks lowered the gun. He was thinking that, yeah, he should've greased the mouthy little wop. There wouldn't be jack the others could do about it. One pull of the trigger and no more Fabrini, two more pulls and he could waste them all. But, for some reason, he didn't. Even he wasn't sure why. There were no laws in this place, only the ones you made up as you went. And it wasn't that his conscience was bothering him or even the fact that it would be murder. He could live with that. No, it wasn't any of those things and although Saks couldn't admit it to himself, the real reason was that he could not face the fog alone. The idea of it . . . and what called it home . . . was just too much.

"Maybe," Menhaus said sheepishly, "you could shoot us something to eat with that. We can't live on that shit in the pouches forever."

"Sure," Saks said.

"Or maybe just kill anything . . . anything that comes after us." Saks smiled. "Why not? As long as I got three bullets left in case you sweethearts try to get funny with me."

And that, of course, was it in an eggshell, the others realized. Saks would kill them if they didn't do what he said. He wanted to be boss, needed to be in charge. And if they didn't play the game by his rules, then he'd shoot them and feed them to the wildlife. It was a simple arrangement. An age old one.

"As long as you play by my rules, everything'll be fine," Saks told them.

"And if we don't, you kill us," Fabrini said.

Saks kept smiling.

Cook was watching Saks as they were all watching him. He was becoming less and less afraid of what might be waiting in the mist and more afraid of what was in the boat. Particularly now that it had a gun. But Saks was right about one thing: they were quite a bunch. They were led by a violent, arrogant asshole with a gun. And Fabrini had that dark, slow burn in his eyes like all he was living for was the chance to kill Saks. And Menhaus? He was useless, because he'd just go with the flow as he probably had his entire life. Then there was Crycek . . . well, no point going into that. Crycek was nuttier than peanut brittle.

And what about you? Cook asked himself. *Do you really think you're any better than the rest? You can sit there and play the voice of reason all you want, but the bottom line is that you're as fucked up as the rest. You get your chance, you'll kill Saks. Let's not forget that. Maybe you'll be killing your father all over again, but you'll kill him all the same.*

Yeah, they were quite a crew to dump into the same lifeboat and particularly in this haunted sea. Anyway you served it all up, Cook figured, it wasn't exactly peaches and cream.

"See, you got it all wrong," Saks said. "I don't want to kill anybody. I want us to live through this, one way or another. But being that I got the gun and that I'm in charge, I'm pretty much God. And it'll be up to me to sort out any of your sorry asses if I decide you're a danger to the rest. Keep that in mind, Fabrini. Because I swear to God, I'm not

fucking around here."

There wasn't much to say after that. They watched the body drift away. Maybe Gosling was right about there being subsurface currents, fingers of unseen motion. For the body gradually moved off or the lifeboat did. The body hadn't gone more than a hundred feet before it rose up suddenly with a bubbling gout of foam and came back down, seeming to thrash and jerk in countless directions like an epileptic having a massive seizure.

But it was no seizure.

Seizures didn't have cutting wet-leather dorsals and tearing razor teeth. Only sharks did. Cook saw them hit the body like torpedoes, maybe a dozen of them. In that murky water, they looked very much like sharks . . . but they weren't sharks. Not exactly. These fish ranged in size from maybe fifteen inches to three feet. They had long, slim bodies and heavy heads plated like armadillos, seemed to move with a serpentine eel-like propulsion.

Whatever they were, they shredded the body to bone within minutes. And then they tore the skeleton apart, too.

No, they weren't sharks.

They were worse.

23

While Cushing and Soltz slept, George kept watching the fog, waiting for it to vomit something else out at them. He kept seeing shapes and shadows out there and could never really be sure if they were actually there or he was dreaming them. In the back of his mind, despite himself, he was still sensing something out there. Something big and encompassing and . . . well, *evil.* Because that was the word his brain kept throwing at him.

Evil.

Something incalculably evil.

A cancer waiting out there that would eat a man's mind straight down to the marrow.

But he wouldn't let himself think too much on it because he didn't want to go insane. It would just be too damn easy, all things considered. But the bottom line was that he didn't have to consciously *think* about it, maybe his imagination was just permanently stuck on high-rev . . . or maybe it was thinking about *him.* Some grinning, loathsome god of maritime wastes, some dark lord of black depths and ghost ships, of haunted seas and drowned sailors. A demented, slithering malignance that was vast and empty like the black spaces between the stars, something that could only fill itself with human terror and anxiety, madness and dread and desperation.

The very embodiment of the fear that the seas had always inspired. This thing given flesh . . . or something like flesh.

Enough, George told himself. *This shit has to stop. If you get out of this horrid dead zone you can spend the rest of your goddamn life being dry and sassy and spinning tales about spooks and ghosts and all that shit. You can wake with the sweats at four a.m. from nightmares about this place . . . but at least then, they'll really be nightmares, not reality. But for now, keep your head, because there's no waking from this one and danger every time you close your eyes.*

Well, now, that was food for thought.

George scratched his beard and ran fingers over his torso. He could feel his ribs. But this wasn't from starvation; he'd always been thin. Wiry. He had a supercharged metabolism and found it nearly impossible to gain weight. The diet gimmicks and infomercials on TV always made him laugh. He'd tried most of his adult life to put on weight and simply couldn't.

The fantasy question everyone kept toying with on the raft was: *What's the first thing you're going to do when you get home?* The answers came in all shapes and sizes. Gosling wanted to pay a visit on a lady friend in New Orleans and get drunk for a week . . . in bed. Cushing intended to quit his job and tell his brother-in-law to get fucked, for reasons he wouldn't elaborate on. Soltz just wanted to rest and get some medication . . . particularly since Gosling had forbid him from touching the medical kit and the pills and ointments within.

But what did George want?

He wanted to spend day after day with his wife and son. He wanted them to know exactly how much they meant to him. He wanted to spend days telling his boy, Jacob,

tales of high adventure at sea. The kid would eat it up. He'd want to hear the stories again and again. And George would oblige as generations of father's had. The three of them would have cookouts and picnics and lazy Sunday afternoons spent doing absolutely nothing. And the nights, after Jacob was fast asleep, would be spent in sweaty embrace with Lisa.

God, but it sounded good.

He'd never realized until the shipwreck just how wonderful his life was. It was just a damn shame it took a disaster to make him see this.

But wasn't that always the way?

The memory of his wife and son, if nothing else, gave him strength. Gave him something to set his teeth into. And he decided that right then and there, he was going back to that life. And God help anyone or *anything* that interfered with that.

Even that old devil in the mist.

24

Everyone handled it differently.

Because that was how things like that worked. What turned one man's guts to sauce, made another smile. And what made one smile, made another scream. And that's how it was out in the lifeboat which was a paper cup tossed into a misting, saline pond where the fog was moist, sparkling, and thick as goosedown.

The lifeboat was surrounded by the shark-fish now.

Like slavering dogs circling a bin of butcher's scraps, they knew there was meat and blood in the boat, they just weren't sure how to get at it. So they circled. Swam under the boat, around it, nudged it, slapped it with their tails. They hadn't resorted to brute force yet . . . this was still a casual flirtation from the wolfpacks of that fathomless, primal sea . . . but it was coming. As more and more of them swam through the drifting clots of weeds and from unknown depths below, gathered in numbers and got in each other's way, something was going to happen. And once blood got in the water and the feeding frenzy began, it was only a matter of time before they tipped the boat and its tender morsels into the water.

At least, that's the way Saks was figuring things. "Lookit 'em out there, boys . . . did you ever see such horrors? Lookit the mouths on them fucking things. Mouths like that . . . Jesus, made to bite off limbs and tear out throats and crunch bones . . ."

If he was practicing his usual brand of sardonic humor, then it just wasn't working. Nobody was amused. Cook was surely not amused and neither was Fabrini. Even Crycek looked scared now.

"I feel like I'm floating in a bucket in a crocodile tank," Fabrini said. "Just waiting to see which one of those wicked bastards figures out how to tip me out."

Saks seemed to like that, so he improved upon it: "Like a rat in a snakepit. You gotta love the comparison."

"Goddamn sharks," Menhaus said.

"Ain't sharks," Saks told him. "I've seen sharks. These ain't sharks."

He knew that much. These pricks would have polished off Jaws in about five minutes. No, not sharks . . . but something like sharks. Saks was thinking they were familiar. That maybe he had seen them before. Not living, of course, but maybe hanging in a museum or on one of those nature documentaries on fossil life. Because, dammit, more he was watching those greedy, shit-ugly excuses for fish, more he was thinking there was something ancient about them. Prehistoric.

Too bad Cushing wasn't along, he'd probably know what Saks was trying to get at. The pictures in his mind he just didn't have words for. Cushing knew a lot of damn useless, trivial nonsense like that.

Saks had dubbed them "boneheads" because their heads were more skull than flesh. All plated and angular with sharp bony ridges and hollows. First time one of them got real close to the boat, Saks had almost pissed himself. Like the little monster was wearing a skull mask . . . or was a living, swimming skeleton. They were as ugly as ugly got. Made sharks looked almost kind of sweet and inoffensive.

"They look . . ." Menhaus began, cocking his head to the side like maybe he was

hoping something relevant would drop out ". . . I don't know, just goddamn spooky, goddamn devilish, don't you think? Them bony faces and black eyes sunk in those pits, jaws opening and closing like they only live to bite and tear . . ."

That got Saks smiling. *That's right, you idiot,* he thought.

Sharks or boneheads, they were vicious streamlined things that could go through flesh and bone like living chainsaws. They came in a wide variety, that was for sure. Some were less than a foot in length, shaped roughly like eels; others were two or three feet in length with massive bullet-shaped bodies that were mostly head; still others — the really big ones — were eight and ten feet long with immense bony jaws that could have bitten through steel cable.

They were all predators. There was no doubt about that. And whether the men in the lifeboat could scientifically classify them and assign them a place in the natural order of things or not, it didn't really matter. For they were here and it didn't look like they were going to leave anytime soon.

Saks was getting a real kick out of them.

But mainly, he supposed, from the absolute fear they inspired in his little crew.

So he watched them, found them interesting.

They were brown or green and sometimes yellow. Speckled, banded, a few of the smaller ones the bright, electric red or shiny sunset orange of carnival glass. Almost artificial looking, you came right down to it.

Menhaus stared at his feet, rocking slowly back and forth, stroking his mustache, maybe thinking and maybe afraid to.

Fabrini cursed the fish, calling them everything but white men.

Cook studied them without emotion, his eyes as flat and dead as those of the predators circling them. But inside, he was coiled tighter than a fireman's hose.

And Crycek? You just never knew what sort of happy shit was bouncing through the haunted ruins of his mind. He watched them, his lower lip quivering a bit.

Saks was the only one who seemed to be enjoying any of it.

In his mind, he viewed the boneheads and his shipmates in a similar vein. Enemies. That's what they were. If he went into the water the boneheads would get him, would take his life quick as a knife across the throat. And it was no different here in the boat. Fabrini and Cook (maybe even Menhaus, too) wanted to take his life as well. Crycek was too withdrawn to do much more than scratch his balls and breathe, but the other three? Traitors and cutthroats. The only thing stopping the murdering bastards was the gun and the knife. They made Saks lord and master. And like any lord, he had his enemies.

Saks didn't want to kill them.

But he would.

At the first sign of trouble.

But he'd only kill one of them. Toss them into that churning sea of teeth, let the others see what the boneheads did with fresh meat. If they'd tear apart a corpse, they'd gobble down a fresh bleeding body in seconds.

"Dammit, Saks," Menhaus said, "why don't you just shoot those goddamn things? They're driving me buggy."

Saks just laughed.

“It wouldn’t do any good,” Cook said hopelessly. “The blood in the water . . . it might drive them mad.”

“That’s right,” Saks said. “Haven’t you ever seen it on TV? They call it a feeding frenzy. Sharks go crazy, start biting everything, including each other. More blood flows, the crazier they get. And those are sharks we’re talking about, not . . . not these bastards.”

“How many more can there be?” Fabrini moaned. “I mean, shit, they just keep coming and coming.”

“Hundreds,” Cook said, cheerful as ever.

The lifeboat was made to handle rough seas with a dozen or more men aboard. The hull was rigid fiberglass. It would’ve taken a torpedo to breech it, but you just never knew. You just never knew anything in that place. The dead sea was a bottomless bag of dark tricks. You didn’t believe that, your death could get real ugly.

“If we start sinking,” Saks said ghoulishly, practically reading Cook’s mind, “we’ll just have to rid ourselves of some excess weight.”

No one wanted to comment on that.

The fish circled and circled, occasionally nipping at one other or breaking the surface with jaws snapping and tails slapping. There had to be about two or three dozen different species out there. Most were armored, but some were more like typical fish but with exaggerated jaws and teeth.

Saks started toying with them, making the others nervous. He was dipping an oar into the water, stirring up that briny soup. As soon as he did that, they came in numbers, thumping against the boat and trying to find something to bite which was very often each other.

“Stop that for chrissake,” Fabrini said. “You’re pissing ‘em off.”

But Saks wouldn’t stop; he was enjoying himself now. He giggled and dipped his oar back in and this time it was hit immediately. And hit with such force he almost lost it. And the gun. Whatever was on the other end was either real hungry or really pissed-off.

“Look what I caught, Menhaus!” Saks said, recovering himself quickly. Because he had been scared there for a moment or two. Was certain he was about to be pulled in.

He lifted his oar out of the water and they all saw his “catch”.

It was even uglier than the boneheads.

It was about two feet long, round as a basketball, shaped much like a pufferfish with a stubby tail. But its flesh was jet black and leathery, wrinkled and convoluted. Its mouth was huge. Big enough, it seemed, that it could have swallowed itself. It had tiny milky-blue eyes lacking pupils. Its jaws were yawned open, dozens of long needle-like fangs imbedded in the oar. They were about the thickness of sewing needles, but easily five or six inches in length.

“It’s . . . it’s glowing,” Menhaus said.

And it was. Deep in its mouth were a series of tiny luminous barbels that probably attracted prey fish into the mouth where the teeth took care of them.

It was flopping and thrashing and Saks could barely hold the oar up. Its sides were expanding with frantic, gulping breaths.

“Hurry up, Menhaus,” Saks said. “Grab the little pisser.”

Menhaus just stared with wide eyes.

But then the fish dropped back into the murk, disappeared. It left two of its teeth

in the oar, though. Saks laughed and threw the oar at Menhaus who almost jumped out of the boat to avoid it.

Then the fun and games ended and they all just watched and waited, hoping and praying the fish would move on. But thirty minutes later, they still hadn't.

"Shit," Fabrini said in a panicked voice, "check that out."

They did.

The fish passing by the boat was a monster. It was easily fifteen or twenty feet long with a spiny dorsal fin that jutted from that decayed sea like an inverted rudder, scathed with ancient scars and threaded with stray weeds. It was a dirty olive brown with a massive head that was plated in shields of ridged bone that looked sharp enough to slit open a belly. Its hinged jaws were gigantic, serrated not with teeth as such but jagged tooth plates, natural and lethal extensions of the armor covering its head and upper thorax.

It moved past the boat, those razored jaws opening and closing, opening and closing. Its eyes were the size of softballs, flat black and dead, remorseless. You could see death in those eyes. Evil, relentless death. Though its upper body was huge and armored, its tail was almost snakelike ending in a huge asymmetrical caudal fin that pushed it through the water gradually.

"Jesus, look at the size of it," Fabrini said.

The other fish, none of which exceeded ten feet and of which most were considerably smaller, gave the big fish room. It swam with a slow, even gait, almost lethargically. It seemed to be almost lazy in comparison with the others that darted around it and out of its way, moving with great heavy strokes of its scythe-like tail. That was until a smaller bonehead swam too close and the big one rocketed forward with a smooth flex of muscle and ingested it with slashing bites. The water became a boiling soup of blood as the others went crazy snapping and nipping at one another. Tails were thrashing, fins knifing, bony jaws slashing in and out of the water.

"They'd tear a man to bits," Fabrini said sickly.

"Two bites!" Saks said. "Did you see that? That goddamn fish had to be five feet and it took it in two bites! Shit and shinola."

Menhaus kept looking at his feet. He didn't want to see, didn't want to know. Cook studied it all with almost clinical detachment. He looked, if anything, like a Nazi sub commander watching a torpedo speed toward its target with cruel indifference. The effect was heightened by his sparse blond hair and sharp, predatory features.

The boat suddenly reeled as if struck by something big. Menhaus let out an involuntary scream. He hung onto his seat like a man on a roller coaster. The boat shuddered again, rocked with motion, then settled down.

"It's that big one," Saks said grimly. "He knows there's something to eat in this boat and he wants it."

"Break out them fucking oars," Fabrini said. "Let's try and pull away from these goddamn things."

"You don't give orders here, Fabrini," Saks said.

"Oh, fuck you."

"Fuck me? Fuck me?" He had the gun on Fabrini. "You wanna rephrase that you little cockmite?"

Fabrini just glared. Oh, it was coming. One way or the other, it was coming.

Saks clenched his teeth, shook his head. “You see, Fabrini,” he said patiently, “what you don’t understand is that I am in charge here. Get it? And if I tell you to jump in and swim with the fishies, you better by Christ do it. Even if it’s that big one. And you don’t touch them fucking oars until I give the word.”

Fabrini gave him the finger. “You ain’t shit to me, Saks. You ain’t nothing or nobody. You ain’t a damn thing.”

Saks sighed dramatically. “Who brought you dipdunks together? Who hired you? Who was in charge?” Saks asked of him. He waited a moment for an answer. Two. Three. Then he shook his head and jabbed a thumb at his chest. “I was. Me. I organized all this and got the show on the road.”

“And it’s been some show,” Menhaus said in a rare moment of defiance.

“Yeah, it’s been a party right from the beginning,” Fabrini said with contempt. “Merry Fucking Christmas.”

Crycek was giggling, but nobody seemed to notice.

“What I’m saying, you goddamn shitrats,” Saks grumbled, “is that I’m in charge. Gun or no gun, I’m the one who should be in charge. I’m the only one here with enough goddamn smarts to run the show.”

Fabrini scowled and watched the fish. “Yeah, you’re a real fucking Mensa genius, Saks.”

“Keep it up, shit-for-brains. See what happens.”

Cook cleared his throat. “We don’t need a foreman out here, Saks. There’s no need.”

“You see, you’re wrong about that. You need one and I’m it. Who else is up to it? You? You can’t keep your hands out of your shorts long enough to crack the whip. And Fabrini? Shit. Fabrini can’t find his own asshole without Menhaus’ crank in his hand. And Crycek? Shit.”

Saks waited for more argument, but got none. And he knew why. Oh yes, he knew very well why. Because they were just putting up with him until he closed his eyes. Then they were going to kill him. Or so they thought.

But they were in for a big surprise.

A very big one.

Menhaus said, “Looks like the big one swam off.”

“But his friends haven’t,” Fabrini said.

Saks, unlike the others, was hoping it hadn’t gone too far. Come tonight or what passed for night, he might just need all the man-eating fish he could lay his hands on. Because tonight was going to be trouble. Tonight the shit was going to fly. And when the shit came down, there was no one better at dodging it than old Saks. Saks was just about to tell them he was onto their little bullshit plot and if they wanted a piece of him now was the time, baby, when something-something goddamned huge-bumped into the bottom of the boat. The boat seemed to be actually *lifted* out of the water. To heave up from the sea and crash back down again with an explosion of foam and sediment, tossing the men from their seats.

Somebody screamed.

Maybe Menhaus, maybe Fabrini, maybe even Saks himself for all he knew.

But not Crycek. His eyes were hazy-looking like steamed-up windows. He was just gone. Nothing was touching him.

Well, well, Saks thought, *guess old Jaws didn't abandon us after all.*

"What the hell was that?" Fabrini stammered.

"I'll give you one guess," Cook said.

Saks pulled himself to his feet and leaned out over the gunwale, the Browning in hand. He saw something pass beneath the boat. A huge amorphous blur. Whatever it was, it was much bigger than the boat. Yeah, it was old Jaws again. Back for more and getting randy by the looks of things . . . except, no, it wasn't Jaws, it was his bigger brother this time.

"The big one again? That monster?" Menhaus asked carefully.

But Saks shook his head and kept watching. Fabrini and Cook did the same. Menhaus stayed on the bottom of the boat where the impact had thrown him. He'd gone a nasty shade of pale. His face was pinched, withdrawn. He was, in effect, a man who did not want to know.

"It looked bigger this time," Saks said.

Nobody said anything to that.

"It couldn't have been bigger," Cook said. "No way."

"Yeah, and what the fuck do you know?" Fabrini snapped. "You think there couldn't be one bigger than that other one?"

"It just seems unlikely."

Saks grunted. "Yeah, you tell the sea monster that when it's biting you in fucking half."

Cook seemed to be looking at something, following it beneath the fouled water with his eyes. "There," he said. "Right there. Look! Can you see it? Can you see it?"

They did. It was a very big fish. Sort of a dirty, almost green-brown in color. Looked to be the same species as Jaws, only far larger.

"Gotta be twenty feet at least," Fabrini said with awe. "Maybe thirty."

"Fucking monster."

"Shoot it," Menhaus raved. "Just shoot it. You gotta shoot the goddamn thing, Saks. You hear me? You gotta shoot it!"

"I bet that baby could just about swallow a man whole," Saks said, enjoying Menhaus' discomfort. It was the little things in life, he knew, that gave you the most pleasure.

"He may have just bumped into us," Cook said optimistically. "It may have not been on purpose. It's possible."

Saks laughed. "And it's possible your mother might have raised some children that lived, but I doubt it."

Cook gave him an acid look that could've peeled paint from a door. But as quick as it had appeared, it was gone. His face became lifeless clay again. "What I'm saying, Saks, is that there's no reason to start shooting the thing. No reason to provoke it. It might just swim off."

"Yeah, I'll just bet," Fabrini said.

"It won't swim off," Menhaus moaned. "Oh no. Not yet. Not just yet. Not until its belly is full."

Fabrini made like he was going to slap him. “Knock it off with that shit, you goddamn pussy.”

“He’s stressed,” Cook said, defending him.

“Fuck you, too,” Fabrini told him. “I’m sick of the lot of you.”

Saks sat back with his arms folded over his barrel chest. He was *enjoying* this immensely. Cracks were beginning to form in their ranks. Sooner or later, if this kept up, they’d be at each other’s throats. Saks couldn’t help but smile.

“Now, now, boys, all for one and one for all. Remember?” Saks chortled.

“Piss off.” Fabrini looked very much like he wanted to hurt someone.

“Five men in a boat, “ Saks said. “Five men in a boat and not a broad amongst us. Life’s a beach and then you die.”

“Life,” Fabrini said. “Shit.”

For once, Saks had to agree with him. Life was shit no matter how you sliced it or how sharp your knife was. He’d had his share of hardship. Of pain. Of deprivation. He knew about life. Life was your old man getting killed in an industrial accident when you were twelve. Life was your old lady drinking herself to death and spreading her legs for every shitbag sailor with a bottle of vodka. Life was quitting school when you were sixteen and going to work in a hellhole foundry. Life was when your kid brother got knifed for his lunch money when he was ten fucking years old. Life was joining the Navy when you were eighteen to be a Seabee because you loved that old John Wayne flick and getting your ass sent to Vietnam as a joke. Life was pushing back the jungle with dozers for a Marine compound while gooks with Russian rifles sniped at you. Life was getting killed because you were digging latrine pits or drainage ditches or laying a runway. And life was payback, too. It was opening up on a gook patrol with heavy machine guns and watching those gutless slant-eyed shits dance like marionettes with clipped strings. Yeah, that was life, baby. And life was also years later in another goddamn jungle watching the only friend you ever had get dragged downriver by a crocodile the size of a Buick. Yeah, that was life. And life was being in a boat in the middle of a godforsaken, monster-infested ocean just this side of Hell with three guys who wanted you dead and a fourth who was too crazy to care either way.

That was life and life was just fucking peachy.

Saks shook his head, clearing it all away. “Hey, Cook,” he said. “You look hot, friend. Why don’t you jump in and have a swim with that motherfuck of a fish? Take your fishing line with you, maybe you can hook that bastard, fry his ass up in a pan. Fabrini’ll help you. He’s that kind of guy.”

But they didn’t even look at him.

Just at those fish, big and small, weaving around the boat, keeping an eye out for the gigantic shadow of something much bigger.

25

Cook could take it.

He could take it very well, thank you. He could take every ounce of shit Saks could dish out and keep coming back for more. Nobody could take more than he could.

He could take it and take it and take it.

But give it back? No, that wasn't his way. Unless you wanted to count that little instance of him killing his father. But he hadn't wanted that. He just hadn't been given a choice. He didn't want to kill anymore than any other sane person. Just like he didn't really want to kill Saks. But, sooner or later, there might just not be a choice in the matter. He might have to kill him.

If I get that gun, he thought icily, then maybe. Just maybe I'll do him out of general principles.

But it wouldn't be in cold blood.

Saks would be given the chance to act like a rational human being. And there was the difference. Saks probably wouldn't give any of them the same chance. Because deep down, Saks was not a civilized man. He was a crazy, bloodthirsty animal who drew his only true pleasure from the suffering of others.

And there was no denying that.

The big fish hadn't come back and slowly the tension had drained out of everyone, drop by drop. But like sponges, they were still soaked full. Only getting out of that dead zone would ever really squeeze them out. The smaller fish were still around, though not as many now. They bumped the boat and fought from time to time, but other than that, it was quiet. Real quiet.

Slowly then, the men began talking again and especially after Saks ordered Menhaus to dole out some chocolate and crackers and a few sips of water.

"What's the first thing you'll do when you get home, Cook?" Menhaus said, shifting effortlessly back into denial of where they were and what they were facing.

"If you get home," Fabrini said morbidly.

Saks laughed.

"Well, I'll probably take a hot bath and have a good dinner and sleep for three days," he said. "That sounds good to me."

Menhaus smiled. "That does sound good. Me, I think I'm going to collapse on the couch and let the wife pamper me for a week."

"Shit," Fabrini said. "You guys got no imagination. Me, I'm going to get a bottle of booze and a couple whores and have me a good old time."

"How about you, Saks?" Menhaus asked.

Saks smiled, all teeth. "I think I'll reserve judgment. Some of us aren't going home again."

26

Although it was hard to tell what was night and what was day and how long of a duration either might be, Gosling posted his little crew in shifts of two hours each. Their job was to keep their eyes and ears open. Not only for danger, but for signs of survivors or land.

Because he was still holding out hope that there was land here. Had to be somewhere. There had to be land under all that oily water and it only stood to reason that sooner or later, some of it had to poke up and form an island or a continent.

This is what Gosling told himself.

This is what he was clinging to.

He didn't know what was out there and what terrible forms it might take, but if he could get some dry land under his feet, he figured that they'd all stand a chance. A chance of living and just maybe, figuring a way out of this.

And maybe his hopes of this weren't much, but it was the only game in town so he held onto it and held onto it tight.

"You guys kill me, sitting over there like that," Saks said in a dry, raw voice. "Not talking. Not moving. Not doing a damn thing."

"What's there to do?" Menhaus said. "And, besides, maybe what we ought to do is be quiet. Crycek said-"

"Fuck Crycek," Saks said. "He's certifiable. Ain't you, Crycek?"

Crycek did not say anything; he stared out at the fog and the water and weeds, maybe thinking things, but not saying them.

"Leave him alone," Cook said. "What's he hurting? What are any of us hurting?"

But Saks didn't comment on that. At least not with his voice. But his eyes, well, they were saying things and they were the sort of things nobody wanted to hear.

"What?" Fabrini said. "We're not allowed to just sit now, big boss man? What the hell do you want us to do?"

Saks laughed deep in his throat and it sounded like a low rumble of thunder. "Man, you're slick. The lot of you. Slick as fucking oil. You think I don't know what you're whispering about over there? What you murdering bastards are planning? I know, trust me, I know everything."

Cook put a hand on Fabrini, to keep him calm. "We're not planning anything, Saks. All anybody wants is to go home."

Saks licked his lips even though his tongue was getting dry. He looked at each of them in turn. He let his eyes hang on each man for a moment or two as if to say, lying bastards, I know what you're thinking, I know, I know . . .

Then he grinned.

A huge, moony grin like a cat with a mouse. He started laughing. He kept laughing for several minutes. "Stupid dumb shits," he cackled. "Don't you know I'll kill you? That I'll kill each and every one of you mutinous goddamn dogs before I'll let you lay a hand on me? Don't you see that?"

Jesus, he's cracking up, Fabrini thought nervously.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," Saks ranted.

"Come on, Saks," Cook said. "You're being paranoid. Quit wasting your energy with this. For God's sake, look where we are and what we're facing . . . how can you act like this?"

"He's right," Menhaus said quietly. "We have to pull together."

Saks had a confused, dopey smile on his face. He was humoring the lot of them. *Sure, guys, pull together. Let's all pull together. All for one and one for all, eh? That'll come in handy when you shitrats jump me and throw me to the damn fishies. Oh, and then you'll laugh, you'll laugh and laugh, won't you?*

Cook watched him and didn't like what he saw. "Easy," he said.

Saks kept shifting in his seat restively like there were splinters in his ass. "You guys better start using your heads cause old Saks is in charge and he's a hard master. Goddamn, yes."

"Please, Saks," Menhaus said. "Just relax."

Saks started laughing again. But there was even less humor in that laughter now

than there was before. It was more like an insane cackling, rising up high and hollow like dead laughter in an empty room before becoming a low, evil chuckle. “You bastards. You assholes. You fucking shitbugs,” he said. “How stupid do you think I am? Don’t you see that I’m on to you? That I know your game? You’re not waiting for dark anymore, you’re just waiting for an opportunity, any opportunity. Any chance you can get to kill me. Oh, I see it in your eyes. I see it just fine.”

Cook and Fabrini looked at each other. Their eyes said volumes. Saks was starting to crack and there was no denying it any longer. The man was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Menhaus studied his feet for a time, then said, “Why should we kill you, Saks? Christ, we need you. You’re the only one who can pull us through this. You’re the only guy here who has any sea experience. If you can’t save our asses, nobody can.”

“Yeah,” Saks said.

Something like that, coming from anyone but Menhaus, would have been greeted with a hateful outburst. But there was something harmless about Menhaus. Something almost brotherly. It was hard to imagine the big jolly man hurting anything or anyone. He seemed incapable. The sort of guy who was a sucker for kids and small animals.

Menhaus saw his opening and went for it. “I’m not a violent man, Saks. I’ve lost just about every fight I’ve ever been in. And most of ‘em I ran away from. It’s just not in me to hurt anyone. I don’t have what it takes. So when I tell you that I wouldn’t let these guys hurt you, you can believe me. If it comes down to that, I’ll warn you. And I’ll stand by you.”

Fabrini, whose brain worked very simply, looked like he’d been slapped. “What are you, Menhaus? Fucking crazy? This guy’s a psycho.”

“Shut the fuck up, Fabrini, or I swear to God I’ll kill you,” Saks snapped, his voice hot and electric.

Tendons strained in his neck when he said this. His eyes bulged. A vein throbbed at his temple. His face was the color of blood. He wasn’t fooling around and they all saw it now.

“What I said is-” Menhaus began, trying to undo the damage.

“What you said I want to believe,” Saks told him. “You don’t know how much I want to believe that. But I don’t know. I just don’t know. You’re either real sincere or real slick. I don’t know which.”

Menhaus was breathing heavy now. “I meant it, Saks. I meant every word.”

Saks stared him down. Maybe looking for something that would tell him it was all a lie. He found nothing.

“If you mean that,” Saks said, “then come over here with me.”

28

George watched that dead, misting sea and it almost felt like it watched him, too. You watched that graveyard expanse long enough, you started thinking of the sea as more than a natural force but as a living, breathing entity. Something sentient and calculating, a huge evil intelligence that plotted your death with inhuman patience.

And when you were talking about the sea George was watching, those ideas came to you real easy.

Like someone or something wants me to think that.

But he wasn't going back there again.

That was Fog-Devil territory.

So George kept his mind busy by thinking of food, of drinks. Cigarettes. He was pretty sure he would've sold his soul for a can of beer.

He kept watching the sea and that's when he saw . . . well, he didn't know exactly *what* he was seeing. Something in the fog. Nothing gigantic or especially threatening this time, just, well a shadow or shape flitting around in the mist.

He looked and it was gone. But it had been there. Something had been there.

George swallowed, figured he was hallucinating. It wouldn't have been the first time. You stared into that dirty fog long enough, you could see just about anything. Some things you wanted to see and others you'd rather not look upon. It was the nature of the fog, always slowing drifting and churning like the steam coming off a bubbling pot, but slower and thicker and almost curdled-looking.

Again, a suggestion of movement out there.

He looked over at Soltz and Cushing. They were sleeping. Gosling was, too. It was George's watch. And what had Gosling said to him? *Just sweep your eyes back and forth, George, never stare at anything too long or you'll start seeing things that ain't there.* Gosling had been dead serious when he said that. There was not so much as a glimmer of humor in his eyes. Gosling had spent a lot of his life on watches and he knew the funny things you might see out there.

George saw that flutter of motion again and shook his head. Jesus, but a cigarette would have been good. A cigarette and a cup of hot coffee. They would have straightened his head right out.

He closed his eyes, then opened them and looked around in the raft. Just those three men dozing in the roomy interior beneath the canopy and George himself at the door, the fog moving out there, drawing him in.

You need me, Gosling had said, *you wake me, hear?*

Gosling. Jesus. Mother Hen.

George looked away from the fog, had to force himself to, and studied the water instead. It was steaming and rank, filmed with a rotting membrane that seemed to be equal parts sediment, slime, and decaying organic matter. From time to time it quivered like jelly, as if some underwater current was stirring it. Little islands of weed and knotted creepers floated on it, a scum of pink algae.

The mist itself seemed chilly and damp, but the sea was warm. Like a mud bath, it was warm and oddly inviting.

Something moved out in the fog again.

When George looked up, it was gone.

Every time he averted his eyes, it moved. Like maybe it did not want to be seen, not yet. Which got George to think something was playing with him. Something was playing headgames with him, maybe wanting to scare him or disturb him or just make him goddamn uneasy. If that was the case, then they or *it* were doing a fine job for George *was* all those things. Gooseflesh had spread out on his lower belly and his balls had sucked up now, like they were afraid of being exposed.

Motion again.

Then it was gone.

Like some child, it occurred to George, some kid out there flitting about in the fog, playing hide-and-seek and catch-me-if-you-can. Wanting George to get a peek, but no more. Not yet. Not until he or she was ready, because then it was going to be real funny-

But it wasn't funny.

George badly wanted to pop a flare out there and see what was lurking beyond the fog, sliding in and out of it like a naughty little boy hiding in the curtains.

George kept swallowing, but he couldn't seem to moisturize his throat. It felt like old machine parts, rusty and seized-up, choked with dust and mouse droppings.

The sea was quivering a bit, those clots of fetid weeds sluicing about as if something was pushing them from below. A great dark mass of them swept against the side of the raft with a weird, whispering motion like somebody breathing.

George caught the movement this time.

And this time, it did not try to hide.

What he was seeing was a figure standing just at the periphery of the fog bank, enshrouded in wisps of fog, yet very visible. So visible that he could see that the figure was small and that it was a little girl of all things. She stood stock still like a mannequin or a puppet waiting for fingers to work her.

George blinked and rubbed his eyes.

When he looked back, she was still there.

There was a chill moving up his spine now, spreading out over his shoulders and forearms. He was telling himself that he could not be seeing a little girl standing out there. She would have sank like a rock and what would a little girl be doing out in the mist in the first place?

George looked back toward Gosling, wanted to say something, wanted to rouse him, but his throat was simply too dry. It had constricted down to a pinhole now and he could barely draw a breath.

You need me, you wake me, hear?

But George could not. He was barely breathing. Locked tight, motionless, his heart just a shallow pattering in his chest.

The girl was waving to him now.

And George could do nothing, not a goddamn thing. He didn't have the strength to wave back. And the idea of waving, of drawing attention to himself . . . it was unthinkable. For in that little girl was the embodiment of every fear he'd ever known, every adult anxiety and childhood terror alive and breathing and rustling.

The girl was moving now.

George could see it happening and was telling himself madly that he had to push these awful images from his mind, because it was all hallucination, just some dark fiction vomited up from the depths and if he let it root in his mind, if it got too strong of a hold there . . .

But he didn't think he was hallucinating.

He was seeing some little girl in what appeared to be 19th century period dress moving in his direction, getting closer and closer and he was absolutely helpless to do anything but watch it happen.

He told himself: *You are not seeing a little girl out there. I don't know what in Christ that is, but it cannot be a little girl. It's something else. Either a fiction your mind created and fleshed out . . . or something worse. Something that wants you to think it's a little girl.*

And that made perfect sense to him.

Yes, something vile and degenerate, the sort of thing that haunts black submarine valleys and lives in the rotting hollows of sunken ships. Something that picks through the bones of drowned men and howls through high masts and calls ships down into abyssal plains. Yes, that's what it was. The living, phobic personification of all the men, women, and children lost at sea and drawn into murky graveyards of swaying kelp and gutted coffin-ship and barnacle-encrusted bone that no light would ever touch.

George thought maybe she was standing on an island of weed, but that wasn't so. She was moving, yes, but standing perfectly still, drifting in his direction very slowly, just above the water. She was wrapped in tendrils of fog, but he could see that she wore a royal blue silk taffeta dress trimmed in white ribbon and braid. A party dress. There was a gold Celtic cross around her neck.

A ghost, his mind told him, *a ghost of some little girl sucked down into the dead sea, a shade that haunts the mist . . .*

As she got closer, he saw her hair was done in golden ringlets and her face was smooth and white like porcelain. A Victorian doll. She looked exactly like a Victorian doll.

No, not at all.

That face was corpse-white, bleached by seawater, the eyes just huge black pits punched into it and filled with a misty yellow glow like full moons sinking into a cloudbank. Hazy and misty and ghastly. She was only ten or fifteen feet away now and he could see that she was fouled with strands of weed that draped over her shoulders and were tangled in her hair. Her dress was a dingy rag spotted with mildew. Fog was steaming from her, boiling inside her and blowing out through innumerable holes torn through her like she was burning up inside. She came on with a wake of churning, smoky mist, tendrils of fog seeping from her outstretched fingertips.

George felt something shatter inside his head like glass in a faraway room.

Closer and closer yet. He could see the fog bank through the fissures eaten through her, could see the green marine worms burrowing at her throat. Her eyes were wide and glistening and yellow, a rope of drool hanging from her lips.

There was something building in George, something raging and sharp and violent: a scream scraping up the back of his throat.

Your soul . . . she's come to suck away your soul.

Those puckered white fingers reached for him and her mouth opened like a black, seething blowhole.

And George screamed.

Screamed until she was gone, dissipated like vapor, and he could hear his voice echoing through the fog, becoming something else and coming back at him like a dozen taunting voices. None of which sounded like his own.

Then there was a hand on his shoulder shaking him and Gosling was yelling something.

"What?" George said. *"What?"*

"Was is it?" Gosling demanded, his hands on George strong and sure. "What in the fuck is it?"

Both Cushing and Soltz were staring at him with barely-concealed horror.

But George couldn't tell what he saw, because he just wasn't sure. So, instead, he let go with the first lie his mind produced: "I . . . I must have fallen asleep, had a nightmare . . ."

But they didn't look like they believed him anymore than he believed himself.

He only hoped they couldn't hear what he was hearing. A high, mocking childish giggling from somewhere deep in the fog.

29

"Either you're with me or against me," Saks said, aiming the Browning in the general direction of Fabrini and Cook and Crycek. "You're either with me, Menhaus, or you're with them. What's it going to be?"

"Saks," Menhaus said breathlessly, "come on now."

He was directly in-between the opposing sides now. Saks was in the stern and the others were up near the bow and he himself was seated roughly amidships. This is where things got complicated and dangerous. If he went to Saks, the others would never trust him again. And if he stayed with them, Saks would think everything he'd said was bullshit.

"What I would like, everyone, what I would really like is for all this to stop," Menhaus told them, trying desperately to sound calm and reasonable, but probably only succeeding in sounding like a scared little boy. Which was pretty much how he felt. "This can't go on. It just can't."

Saks's reply to this was to aim the gun directly at Menhaus. There was a deadly gleam in his eye. He looked very much like a man who wanted very badly to hurt someone.

He's going to kill me, Menhaus thought.

"Get your ass over here now," Saks said, "or get over there with *them.* If you're with me, you'll live to tell the tale. With them . . . you get the picture, don't you?"

Menhaus looked around uncertainly. He was almost wishing those horrible fish would come back, even the big one. Or maybe that something even worse would come sliding out of the mist. At least then, they'd have a common enemy.

But he supposed they already did: each other.

"Don't do it," Fabrini said. "Don't go over there. You get involved with that gutless shit, you're going to be an accomplice to murder. Mine or one of the others. And you don't want that, do you?"

No, Menhaus certainly did not want that.

"Don't listen to that goatfuck," Saks said. "He don't know shit, Menhaus. Besides . . . look around you. All of you, look right fucking around you. You think we're adrift in the Gulf of goddamn Mexico here? Well, we ain't. Where we are there are no laws. It's survival of the fittest. You come with me, Menhaus, I'll keep you alive and I just might get your ass out of here. But you stick with them . . ."

"He's talking nonsense," Cook said. "We can only survive together."

But he didn't understand. Neither did Fabrini. It was the only way. The only possible way to pacify Saks.

Swallowing, Menhaus went and sat in the seat directly in front of Saks.

"You cheap fuck," Fabrini spat.

Cook said nothing.

Crycek smiled, then pointed upward . . . as if that made a lick of sense. Then he nodded, thinking he'd made his point. But like most things with him, it was just too damn abstract.

They think I'm a traitor, Menhaus thought, but they just don't get it.

"That's the way," Saks said happily. "Now we can both watch 'em."

Saks and Fabrini engaged in a staring contest. It lasted only a few minutes. The hatred between them was like a pall hanging in the air and it smelled of raw meat and gunpowder.

Saks smiled. "Well, I guess you boys are fucked," he said.

Cook and Fabrini just stared, waiting for the bullets.

But as usual, Crycek looked like he was waiting for something else entirely.

"Which one of you should I kill first?" Saks said. "Which one?"

"Kill me," Fabrini rasped, "you fucking pussy."

"It's not that simple, Fagbrini. Not that simple at all." He patted Menhaus on the shoulder. "In fact, I'm going to let my pal here decide."

"No," Menhaus said flatly. "I won't."

"Yes, you will. If you don't, I'll kill *you."*

The barrel of the gun was shoved into Menhaus' spine. It was death and he knew it was death. He'd thought he could join Saks and pacify him. Keep him from killing the others, but it wasn't that simple. He'd simply underestimated the twisted, sadistic turn of Saks's madness. The man was so far gone now he just didn't realize how crazy he was. Right and wrong had become vague concepts. And maybe, just maybe Saks wasn't so crazy as Menhaus might have thought. Maybe he'd planned it this way all along. He only wanted Menhaus on his side because it fit into his plans. He had an unwilling participant now in murder.

"Well, old buddy, which one?" Saks asked, almost lighthearted.

Menhaus had no saliva left. Yet, he attempted to lick his lips. "This is insane, Saks. We'll go to prison for this."

Saks started laughing. "Christ, Menhaus! Look around! You see any fucking cops or jails or judges? No, we do what we want here. Frontier justice, eh?" The gun was pressed deeper into his back. "Now decide."

Fabrini and Cook maintained their cold, hateful stares. Menhaus admired the both of them like he'd never admired anyone ever in his life. They were men. Real men. Real human beings. Scared shitless inside, but facing death bravely. Neither of them would ever stoop to doing what he did. They'd die first.

But they don't understand, they just don't understand. I did this to save them, I really did . . .

And he was right: they *didn't* understand. They thought he was weak and selfish and empty inside. That's what they thought and Menhaus knew there wasn't a damn thing he could say to change their minds.

"Well?" Saks said.

"I guess Cook is the one," Menhaus said in airless voice.

Cook just stared, unblinking.

Crycek started tittering. "All the little puppets in a row," he said in a dry, ragged voice. "Doing what they're told to do. You're all so fucking stupid, every one of you. And especially you, Saks, you're the dumbest little puppet of all. *He's* out there, watching and listening, getting stronger as we get weaker. Only it isn't a *him,* it's a *they,* a *them.* Them ones hiding in the fog, they're the ones that pull your strings and make you dance and you, you silly fucking little man, you let them! You let them! They own your mind, they

make you walk and talk and hate and kill . . . you're the stupidest one of all! *The stupidest!"*

"Shut your goddamn hole!" Saks ordered him, pulling the gun out of Menhaus' back and aiming it right at Crycek's staring face. Right at that sallow mask with the crooked, lunatic grin.

But Crycek just shook his head. "I don't have to shut up and I won't shut up! They already own you, but my mind is my own. They can't get in my head because I won't let them in there, won't let them get fat sitting in their web sucking the juices of my mind dry!" He pressed the tips of his fingers to his temples. "I make my own decisions, do you hear? Not you and not them!"

"You're goddamn nuts," Saks told him.

But Crycek assured him that he was completely in control of his faculties. He dared Saks to shoot him, because he didn't honestly believe that those bullets *would* kill him. "It might look like they did and it might look like I die . . . but will I? Or is it just something they've planted in your little mind? Is that even a gun you hold, Saks?" He started giggling afresh, wiping spit off his chin with the back of his hand. "Think about it, Saks! Go ahead, think about what I say! This might be your last chance! For all you know, for all you *really* know, you might be alone right now. Lost in this hungry fog all alone . . . and you just *think* we're here. We might have all gone down with the ship . . . just ghosts, memories. C'mon, Saks, close your eyes, *when you open them we won't be here . . . ghosts.."*

"SHUT UP!" Saks roared, unable to listen to that droning, insane voice any more. He could feel Crycek up there, in his head, like dirty fingers sorting around, making him think things and feel things, filling his mind with lies and doubts. "YOU BETTER SHUT THE FUCK UP IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU!"

But Crycek just giggled. "Can you *feel* them, Saks? Can you feel them up there draining you dry? *Sucking your mind away?"*

Saks was trying to sort it out, because none of it was true. It couldn't be true. It was all madness what Crycek was saying. There was nothing out in that fog, no devil, no evil presence that ate minds. And . . . and in the boat, Cook and Fabrini and Crycek were there. They were not ghosts, because if they were ghosts that would mean that Saks himself was the crazy one. Talking to shadows. It would mean that he was by himself out there, that he was *totally alone* . . .

So Saks did what came natural to him.

He pulled the trigger on the Browning. The shot rang out and the bullet passed harmlessly over Crycek's head. And that shut him up. It didn't wipe that smirk off his face, but it sure as hell shut him up. The others weren't saying much either, just staring with those sweaty, sooty faces. Accusing faces.

Finally, Fabrini said, "Nice try, Crycek. It almost worked."

But you could see from the look on Crycek's face that it had not been a ruse. He believed everything he had said.

"Next one goes right between your eyes, Crycek." Saks had calmed now, but still looked a little confused. He put the gun back on Menhaus. "Okay . . . you said Cook and Cook it's gonna be. You sure now?"

"I'm sure."

Saks raised the gun and took aim.
And then Menhaus made his move.

30

It happened fast.

As Saks took aim Menhaus moved with a speed he'd thought abandoned him years ago. Saks hadn't seen it coming, hadn't even remotely expected it. He probably just assumed Menhaus would curl up and pout. And that was his mistake. Menhaus threw his body against Saks, upsetting his aim and knocking him into the gunwale. The gun went off, but the bullet went into the sky. And then Menhaus had his hands on it, struggling against Saks. Saks kicked him in the stomach, in the thigh, but he would not let go.

By then, Cook and Fabrini were at his side.

Fabrini punched Saks in the face about four or five times while Cook and Menhaus wrestled the gun away.

The fight gone out of him, Saks let it go and sunk to the deck plating. Used up and empty, all the hot air gone now like somebody had bled him empty.

He did not look at them or even speak.

Cook took the gun to the bow where it would be out of harm's way.

Fabrini took the knife from Saks's boot while Menhaus held him.

It was all over very quickly.

"There," Fabrini said, giving Saks a good kick in the ribs. "There you are, asshole. What're you going to do now?"

Saks just stared at him, his face smeared with blood.

"I'm going to kill you," Saks said and dove at him.

31

The three of them managed to put down Saks's latest rebellion without too much trouble. But they knew now that he was too far gone to reason with. He had to be tied up. They used Fabrini's belt. They knotted his arms behind his back and threaded the belt through an oarlock, knotting it again. At last, Saks was harmless. He wouldn't hurt them or himself now.

But it was pathetic, Cook thought, having to do something like that in the first place.

What was it all coming to?

"At least, at least now we can breathe, now we can relax," Menhaus said, still not sounding so sure of it. "We can figure out things . . . maybe get out of here."

"There's no getting out," Crycek said. "Not yet, maybe not ever. We're drifting . . . can't you feel it? We're being drawn deeper into this place."

He had a point and nobody dismissed it. Where before the weeds had been in isolated little patches and clumps drifting about, now there were great banks of them. The water was still open for the most part, but the islands of weed were so huge you couldn't see where they ended. They just faded off into the mist like headlands. And they were massive and thick, steaming and verdant and stinking of jungle swamps.

"He's right, you know. Crycek. We're all going to die," Saks said almost cheerfully. "Each and every one of us. Look at those weeds . . . sooner or later they're gonna snare us up and that'll be all she wrote."

"Shut the hell up," Fabrini said.

"You better shoot me if you want to shut me up," Saks told him.

It looked like Fabrini was indeed considering it.

"Maybe . . . maybe some day the weeds will part and this lifeboat'll drift out same way we drifted in . . . except there'll be five skeletons in it. It's happened before. A whole ship one time . . . went missing three years, then it just showed up one day and-"

"Want me to gag him?" Fabrini asked.

Cook seemed to be in charge now. He was the most level-headed one of the bunch. "I don't know. We'll leave it up to Saks. Why do you say, dumb ass, do we have to gag you or are you gonna be a good boy?"

Saks went quiet, but you couldn't wipe the look of grim certainty off his face or erase the mad dog glare of insanity from his eyes. These were constants. Things the others had to pretend they weren't seeing. But it was no simple matter to look lunacy in the eye and ignore its ramifications. To know, deep down, that under the right conditions, it could take anyone, anytime.

And no one knew this better than Cook.

Nobody in the world.

He'd felt it that day he'd killed his father. The blinding, white-hot, ice-cold slow burn that was true madness, whether temporary or permanent. And until you experienced it, tasted it, filled your belly with it, you could never appreciate it or how ugly it all really was. Because once you'd tasted it, you never got that awful flavor out of your mouth.

Cook didn't like the idea of being in charge. He would have preferred a very

democratic sort of leadership, a council made up of him and Fabrini and Menhaus. Maybe even Crycek because now and then he made sense. But it wasn't going to be that way. Surely Fabrini was tougher and more physically able than he. Menhaus had been around more, had more experience. And Crycek . . . if he wasn't so loopy . . . he was an experienced sailor. Yet, they seemed to be looking to Cook for leadership. He seemed to have the final say whether he liked it or not.

But all he really wanted was to sleep.

He was dead tired . . . yet he didn't dare close his eyes. He had to watch Saks and watch him close. If trouble was going to come, it would come from his direction.

At least, that's what Cook was thinking.

And then something hit the boat.

And then hit it again.

Soltz was pretty certain about it. “I know what I heard,” he told Gosling and the others. “It was a gunshot. My hearing is more acute than yours. I know what I heard.”

George had heard something, too. They all had. A sort of muted cracking in the distance. It could have been a gunshot . . . but it could have been a lot of other things, too.

“Maybe we ought to get on that radio,” Cushing suggested. “See what we can pick up . . . somebody might have been trying to signal us.”

Gosling considered it. George knew very well what he was thinking, how he didn’t like the idea of listening to that static. It got to a man and particularly when you had that odious sense that it was not just static, but something alive and aware.

“That’s what we should do,” Soltz said.

Gosling looked to George and he just shrugged. What else could he do?

Gosling went up to the bow where all the survival equipment was stowed in waterproof, zippered compartments. He took out the VHF and began to set it up.

George stayed by the doorway, watching.

The others went with Gosling and George just sat there, thinking, thinking about what he’d seen coming out of the fog earlier. Even now, it left him with a dread sense of horror. Something like that, it got under your skin and stayed there like mites. The image of that horrible little girl . . . he couldn’t shake it nor the idea of what she might have done to him.

He knew it wasn’t a hallucination. She had been there, all right. But where did that leave him . . . believing in ghosts?

No, absolutely not, he told himself, *I do not believe in ghosts and spooks. I didn’t believe in them before I was lost in this terrible place and I don’t believe in them now.*

But if she hadn’t been a ghost, then what?

This is what George had been threading through the reels of his brain ever since it happened. She had been dressed in what he thought was 19th century clothing. He figured he wasn’t too far off there. He rather doubted that if it was all a hallucination, that his mind would have conjured up such convincing antique fashions. And it had been convincing . . . her hair, her dress, everything. He’d been around and around on this and he kept coming back to the same thing: the little girl was not a ghost, not really, it was just something else pretending to be the ghost of a little girl.

It was no less spookier than the ghost bit, but it made sense.

Because George could remember, right before it happened, thinking he saw something moving out there and his mind had been filled with images of ghost ships and spooks rising from their watery graves. Just imagination . . . but something out there, maybe his hypothetical Fog-Devil, had read his mind and gave him that which would scare him the most.

It was an aberrant line of thinking . . . yet he almost believed it.

The dead sea . . . for that’s how he thought of this place, as in Dead Sea, proper noun . . . was filled with horrible things. But most of them were merely biology run wild, but this *other,* this Fog-Devil . . . the presence he sensed out in that static . . . maybe it was the original boogeyman, a thing that knew what scared you, pulled it raw and

dripping from your mind and set it loose. Maybe it got off doing that. Maybe it was the very thing that had haunted not only this sea but dozens of others, the very thing that terrified sailors since men first took to the water. The thing that created ghost ships and sea demons and crawling, nameless things that scared sailors to death or became the stuff of legend.

Fantasy? Maybe, but it would explain some things, wouldn't it? George did not think it created monster eels or schools of weird luminous fish or odd little leggy critters that sat on oars-things like that were nature's creations, a seriously fucked-up and alien nature, but nature all the same. No, whatever this thing was, it was not so crude in its creativity, it was not so general. When it scared someone, it made things personal, intimate.

Just as it had with George.

George started getting the creeps looking into the fog and thinking these things, so he joined the others up front. The VHF was operating and Gosling was sending out signals. The static was rising and falling with an almost morphic sound that made you want to sleep. And dream.

"What is that?" Soltz was saying. "What am I hearing there? That pinging, shrilling sound in there . . ."

George had heard it before. A high-pitched pinging like that of a tuning fork, but barely discernable in the static. It came and went. There almost seemed to be a pattern to it, a code, something. You'd hear that pinging, then there would be a strange buzzing pulse that rose up and died. But each time George heard it, he was certain there was a pattern to it. That it was not random and certainly not natural in origin.

"Just noise," Gosling said. "Atmospheric noise."

That sounded good and maybe Cushing and Soltz were buying it, but George certainly wasn't. For there was direction behind those sounds, there was intelligence. Something was making them and he honestly didn't want to know what it was.

"I guess," Cushing began, "I guess it's just some weird interference . . . that's what it must be."

"Sure," Gosling said, but his voice sounded awfully hollow.

If it indeed was static, what they heard next certainly could not be. It happened about three or four minutes later, just about the time Gosling was going to shut the unit off, that static beginning to bother all of them in ways they could scarcely fathom. It started out as a low, distorted whining like a shortwave radio trying to lock on a channel and then it grew high and echoing, became something like a broken up voice full of panic that was saying, *". . . help us . . . oh God help us . . . it's getting close now . . . it's getting close . . . oh dear God . . ."* It faded away and then came back clearer, so clear you could hear the man on the other end breathing and something in the background, a huge and booming sound getting louder and louder. It almost sounded like a great, hollow heartbeat. Boom, boom, boom. *". . . anyone can hear us . . . it's . . . it's coming out of the fog. . . it's coming right out of the fog. . . it's on the decks and . . . it's knocking at the door . . . at the door . . ."*

It then it faded back into the static.

They listened for another minute or two and then Gosling wisely shut the unit off. His fingers were trembling.

33

"Untie me, you fucking idiots," Saks was crying out at the others. "Don't leave me . . . don't leave me tied up like this . . ."

But they had other problems.

They were now in some sort of wide channel cut between two banks of weed and the fish, the boneheads were hammering against the hull of the boat, filled with frenzy and appetite.

But it wasn't them that really scared the men in the lifeboat.

It was their big brother.

He was back.

The huge, ugly twenty-footer with the armored snout and the dead eyes. For something of its sheer bulk, it moved with incredible speed. With eel-like gyrations of its tail, it launched itself at the boat. The impact was hard and fast. It threw the men to the deck and nearly flipped the boat over.

Then it rocketed in and hit them from the other side, then from the stern, propelling the lifeboat forward like it had an outboard hooked up to it. Most of the smaller ones had scattered, but that big ugly mother was standing his ground.

"Jesus Christ," Fabrini said, "it's gonna get us, it's gonna flip the boat . . ."

"Damn right it is," Saks said, enjoying their terror. "It's going to get one of you in the water and swallow you whole."

I don't wanna see that, Fabrini kept telling himself. *I don't wanna see a man get bitten in half by a giant fish. I don't care what else happens out here, but, by Jesus, I don't wanna see that . . .*

The fish came alongside the boat, so close they could not only see it, but smell it. It stank of brine and blood and bad meat, like something that had been chewing on waterlogged corpses. And that probably wasn't too far from the truth.

"Cook!" Menhaus said. "Do something! *We got to do something!"*

The fish hit them again, knocking everybody to the deck again and almost pitching Menhaus into the drink. He let out a high, girlish scream and sank back down to the deck, gripping the uprights of his seat.

The fish came again, riding right on the surface, spiny ventral fins spread out like Chinese fans and sharp enough to cut timber. Cook was right on the gunwale watching it, watching it bump the boat with its iron snout and pass by. Those thick, bony plates that ran from the tip of its nose to its thorax were actually jointed he saw and it gave the fish incredible flexibility.

Cook took out the gun.

He didn't want to shoot, but he didn't see where he had much of a choice.

It nudged up against the lifeboat, those hinged jaws spread wide . . . wide enough to literally bite a man in half . . . and those dermal tooth bones that were like long, jagged shards of glass grated against the fiberglass hull. It could not bite through the hull and mainly because it could not get a grip on it. Had it been wood and not a single piece of formed fiberglass, it would have been able to butt its head through the hull planking.

Cook kept studying it.

He didn't think there was any way in hell that a 9mm round could punch through that armored flesh, just no way. Back around mid-thorax, those bony plates ended and the fish had smooth skin like that of a shark or ray.

It vanished from view for a few moments.

The lifeboat was still moving forward with momentum from the hilt to the stern, cutting through those weedy, congested waters and going God knew where.

"It's coming back," Fabrini said in a defeated voice. "I can see it . . ."

And it was.

It was coming straight on, jaws wide and spraying foam, launching itself at the boat like a torpedo. The impact threw Cushing, Menhaus, and Fabrini into each other. The lifeboat swung in a lazy arc, riding on its gunwale a moment before righting itself. Saks screamed and roared like a wild animal.

It swam alongside the boat and Cook brought up the Browning and put three rounds in it at close range. It didn't seem to have any effect . . . and then without warning, the fish rose up out of the water like a hooked salmon and they could see that it was probably closer to twenty-five feet than twenty. It rose up straight as a peg and for one horrifying moment they thought it was going to come back right down on the boat like a fallen tree. But it missed by scant inches, making the boat rock wildly.

Its huge tail splashed in the water and then it was gone.

Ten, tense, expectant minutes later, it still had not returned.

"I think we made it," Cook said.

But nobody commented on that.

The boat was still moving forward, slicing through the weeds and those coiling tendrils of steam that came off them. The fog blew over and around them in great glistening patches and they were suddenly locked in a fog bank. They couldn't see two feet in any direction. Just hear the bow moving through the weeds that were getting as thick as briars now.

And then the fog receded a bit.

"Holy Christ in Heaven," Fabrini said. "Do you see it? Do you fucking see it?"

They did.

Coming out of the mist was a freighter.

PART THREE

THE DERELICT AND THE DEAD SEA

1

SO THE RAFT DRIFTED, borne by whatever currents there were in that miasmic, clotted sea. It was carried further into those banks of pale green weed that were thick and rotting and pissing a mephitic condensation into the damp air. The mist never lessened, though sometimes it was thin and vaporous and transparent to a degree. And at other times, thick and cloisterous and oddly agitated as if someone had stirred it with a wire whisk.

In his more poetic moments, Gosling saw that sea as being an ocean of blood. It was more pink than red and sometimes a dirty yellow, but it was never clear like water back on . . . well, back where he'd come from. This was an alien sea. A reeking, slimy discharge of watery protoplasm, something drained from a poisoned tumor or squeezed from a diseased placenta. He likened that sea to a petri dish, warm and wet and clogged with organic profusion, a metabolic medium, a fluidic slush of life and death and potential.

Cushing, who was something of an armchair naturalist, told him that wasn't too far off the mark. That this sea — wherever it might be — was a living stew, a nutrient bath where life would be plentiful in amazing varieties and forms. He likened it to the primordial oceans of earth, so very rich in life it was practically a living thing itself.

"And it's perfect, isn't?" he said. "When you think about it? Steaming and moist and warm, an equatorial pond. The temperature of the water is probably unvarying, never too cold or too warm, always just right for things to breed and multiply."

He said he thought the fog was created by the chill air hitting that warm soup of water. Earth's prehistoric oceans and lakes would have been like that — rank and seething and misty, the very cradle of life.

"But none of that tells us where we are," Soltz pointed out.

And that was true.

Cushing said, "Soltz has developed a few theories of his own based on watching Bermuda Triangle shows."

"Oh? And you have a better explanation?" Soltz said. "Because I think at this point we're all waiting to hear it."

"Take it easy," Cushing told him.

Gosling looked over at George. He was sleeping up near the bow. "What is your theory, Soltz? And please tell me it has nothing to do with flying saucers."

Soltz looked offended at the idea of that. As if he wanted to say, well, the Bermuda Triangle is one thing, but flying saucers? What do you think I am? A kook? He looked over at Cushing, then at Gosling. "My theory involves vortices, time/space displacement. I think we were sucked into a vortex of sorts. That would explain why when we first entered that fog we could not breathe."

"What would that have to do with it?" Gosling asked.

"It's pretty apparent, isn't it? That vortex grabbed us and when we could not breathe it was because we were momentarily caught between our world and this one, in some sort of dead zone, the hopping off point between our dimension, say, and where we are now."

Gosling had been thinking pretty much along the same lines, but he did not admit it. “We only lost air for . . . what? Less than a minute? Thirty seconds? Not even probably. Are you telling me this vortex shot us into another dimension like an arrow and did it that quick?”

“Why not? We can’t apply our ideas of time and travel to such things.”

Gosling waited for Cushing with his scientific turn of mind to sweep Soltz and his theories under the carpet, but he did not. And Gosling himself wasn’t in any position to debate any of it either. As a sailor, he’d long been familiar with magnetic deviations and atmospheric abnormalities in the Sargasso Sea and Bermuda Triangle regions. There was no science fiction there. Funny things *did* happen in these places. It was well-documented and research into their causes continued, he knew, to this very day. But unusual navigational and atmospheric conditions were a long way from space/time distortions. A lot of bad writers had been throwing around the idea of those for a long time and Gosling had spent most of his life shaking his head at such pseudo-science.

And now?

Now he didn’t know what to think. Soltz went on in some detail and he listened patiently. It all made a certain amount of mad sense. Ships and planes disappearing from radar because they had been sucked or funneled into this place, most never to return. Yet, there had been a few that *had* returned, hadn’t there? If you wanted to believe the stories in some of those books — stories about planes or ships that had passed through some misty dead zone where their navigational and electronic instruments went haywire and then magically started working again when they passed back through the veil again. And, of course, being a sailor, Gosling had heard his share of tales about ships missing for years suddenly reappearing with no one on board.

Where had they gone?

Was it here? Was this place the answer to the age-old mystery of the ship’s graveyard? Was this the place the early mariners had seen when they told their horror stories of the Sargasso Sea? Had they breezed through here, witnessed nightmares, and then breezed out again?

Fantastic. The very same shit Gosling had always laughed at. Most sailors laughed at these things. But he knew, as they probably did, that at the back of every sailor’s mind there was a thin doubt that held on, despite what science and reason told them. A disorderly little fear that there might be a shred of truth in those old stories.

Vortices. Time/space distortion. Dimensional holes. Magnetic whirlpools that could funnel ships and planes into some alien sphere of existence. Christ, it sounded like the late show. But the fact remained, they were somewhere and it didn’t look much like the Atlantic or the Pacific or the pea green sea for that matter.

“You buy any of that?” Cushing said.

Gosling shrugged. “Maybe. Where we’re standing, one explanation is as good as the next. Something happened, didn’t it? And like Dorothy said, we ain’t exactly in fucking Kansas.”

Cushing smiled. “Did she say that?”

“Way I heard it.” Gosling sighed. “If we got in here, who knows, same thing that sucked us in might shoot us back out.”

“Do you really believe that?” Soltz said, despondent as ever. “Some cages have no

keys."

Gosling ignored that. He touched upon some of the things he had read or heard over the years, see what the others thought. "There must be some connection between this place and ours. Has to be. I'm just hoping it's still open or it might open back up again and soon."

He told them that he had read about a plane that vanished once. It was flying into Nassau or one of them places, supposed to touch down on some little strip there. People on the ground could hear the plane flying over, but they couldn't see it. They were in contact with the pilot on the radio who said he could see nothing but mist above and below. That was the last anybody heard of that plane.

"So, maybe these two worlds are closer than we think," Gosling said.

He said he'd also heard stories about shortwave radio operators picking up transmissions from ships or planes days after they'd disappeared. In some of the wilder tales, it was years later. Then there was the famous case of the five Navy Avenger bombers that disappeared in 1945 off of Fort Lauderdale. A ham radio operator claimed to have picked up their distress call many hours after they would have run out of fuel and been forced to ditch.

"I'm thinking that might tie in with that distress call we heard earlier," Gosling told them, knowing everyone had been scared shitless after hearing that. Himself included. "That might have been something sent twenty years ago or fifty . . . who can say? Maybe in this place, radio transmissions keep bouncing around and now and again, they just slip out and somebody hears them."

There was a mixture of total belief and total disbelief in the eyes of both Soltz and Cushing. But mostly just confusion set with terror. Because they were all remembering that transmission, hearing it echoing in their heads as it probably always would.

" . . . anyone can hear us . . . it's . . . it's coming out of the fog . . . it's coming right out of the fog . . . it's on the decks and . . . it's knocking at the door . . . at the door . . . "

And what they all wanted to know then as they did now was what exactly *was* coming out of the fog? What was on the decks and knocking at the door? And what in God's name was that eerie booming sound in the background that sounded like a hollow, metal heart beating?

Gosling, however, was not about to comment on that.

Soltz had no such compunction. "What do you think it was? What got that ship? And don't look at me like that because we all know that *something* got it. You heard the sound of that voice . . . I've never heard such terror before. That person was scared out of their wits."

Gosling said, "Don't jump to conclusions here. It could have been just about anything. It doesn't have to be something supernatural."

Soltz barked an almost pained sounding little laugh. "Who said anything about the supernatural? That wasn't what I was thinking at all."

"Oh? And what *were* you thinking?" Cushing asked him.

But Soltz would not say. He just sat there, staring into the mist, characteristically morose.

"Listen now, all I'm saying is that there could be lots of reasons for what we were

hearing," Gosling said.

"Don't treat us like children, please," Soltz said to him. "Whatever happened . . . whatever that ship was calling out about . . . it was not normal. Something came out of the fog. Something *horrible.* And whatever it was, it left an empty ship behind."

2

The derelict.

It came out of the fog, huge and dead and forbidding, something you didn't dare look upon and something else you didn't dare look away from. To turn your back on it, would have been like turning your back on a razor coming at you in the darkness. The men in the lifeboat saw it and to them, it was like looking at some graveyard described by thin moonlight. It inspired the same sense of mystery and horror, an almost instinctive phobia. For this ship was like something abominable yanked from a burial ground, a relic dragged from a cursed tomb. Something diseased, sepulchral, and ancient. A tombstone emoting gray silence, a mausoleum echoing with dead whispers, blackness and lunacy. Nothing good could come of it.

Cook saw it, rising out of the mist, and it pulled his guts up the back of his throat in cold, coiling loops. Looking upon it, he could barely breathe.

It was a dire and morbid haunted house made of iron and rust and decay, thrust up from that forest of tangled, spreading weed. And though it was dead and rotting, you got the horrendous feeling that it was not dead *enough.* That somehow, it was unspeakably alive and aware and . . . hungry.

"Like a skull," Crycek said in a wounded, despairing voice. "It looks like a skull stripped of meat."

Fabrini said," Knock it off." But his voice was almost a whisper, as if he was afraid something on the ship might hear him.

"It's just an old ship," Cook said to them. "God knows how long it's been here."

"Sure, that's all it is," Menhaus put in. "Just an old ship."

"You boys keep telling yourself that and you might even believe it," Saks said.

Crycek was shaking his head. "It's full of death . . . can't you *feel* it?"

And they all could, a low and unpleasant thrumming in their heads, the sound of some dark machine idling . . . waiting to cycle to full rev.

Saks chuckled low in his throat. "Scares you girls, eh?" But it had gotten to him, too, and you could see that. Tough-guy Saks. Whatever was in that ship was scratching blackly in his belly just as it was with the others.

Cook was overwhelmed with a mindless horror at the sight of it. He tried to speak, but his throat was thick like it was stuffed with wool and rags. It took him a minute or two. "Let's not get superstitious here. It's just a derelict. It can't hurt you. Might be something we can use on it."

Fabrini looked at him. "You're not . . . I mean, you're not suggesting that we *board* it, are you?"

But Cook's answer to that was to get the oars out.

The ship was caught fast in a bank of weeds. They had crawled right up her hull in glistening green mats like the ship was slowly being devoured by some colony of parasitic plants.

Fabrini and Cook rowed in closer until they hit the weeds which were so thick and congested, they had to use the oars as poles to push the lifeboat through them. Up close, the mist receding, the ship had to be four- or five-hundred feet in length with long decks

and high, twin stacks rising up into the gloom. Cook had never seen a ship quite like her before. What he assumed was the bridge or the wheelhouse was suspended over the foredeck on steel stilts. And from just behind it, running aft to the stacks themselves were a skeletal framework of booms and gantries and derricks rising up like fleshless ribs. It made the entire ship look like the skeleton of some gigantic sea monster trapped in the weed.

As they poled down its length, Cook felt a sickly uneasiness in the pit of his belly. The sight of her up close — huge and lifeless and stark — left his skin cold, made his teeth want to chatter. Dead, certainly, but not untenanted.

The lifeboat slid through the weeds pretty easily, actually riding atop of them and sliding over them for the most part. Yet, it was hard work, poling along like that. But the exertion and the sweat felt good.

After what seemed about an hour, they swung around aft and got up behind her. As they passed through her shadow, the weeds suddenly seemed almost black. Not gray as a shadow might make them, but jet black and oily. When Cook looked again, it was gone.

It was like going into a cemetery at midnight, it occurred to him. You weren't really afraid of ghosts and the dead were just dead, but . . . you just didn't want to do it. You didn't know why, but you didn't want to. You just didn't belong there.

As they came along the starboard side, pushing through those weaving mists, Saks said, "Looks like we're expected."

They all saw it: the boarding ladder was down. Cook and Fabrini urged the lifeboat nearer the ship where the weeds were so thick and snarled it was like pushing through mud. Finally, they reached the ladder.

"What's that shit all over it?" Fabrini asked.

"Some kind of goo," Menhaus said.

Cook was wondering that, too. The steps and handrail of the boarding ladder were festooned with something like cobwebs. On closer inspection, he saw it was a gray-white fungus, a fusty-smelling excrescence that looked like it had grown up out of the weeds and was slimed up the hull of the boat in oily-looking clots and clumps. He prodded some of it with the blade of his oar and a black sap ran from it.

"You ever seen fungus like that?" he asked Crycek, hoping the man's knowledge of marine life had not abandoned him.

But Crycek just shook his head.

Saks said, "Looks like it's eating right into the metal."

And it did.

Cook said, "Menhaus? You feel up to standing guard over Saks here? Can you do that?"

What he was really saying, of course, was *can we trust you not to feel sorry for that so-nofabitch and untie him?*

Menhaus nodded, his eyes stern. "What about Crycek?"

"I'll stay right here," he said. He seemed to have his wits about him finally. "I'd rather do that than go on that old hulk."

"Me and you both," Menhaus said.

"Jesus Christ," Saks said. "Untie me already. I'm okay now. I just lost my head

was all. I'm fine now."

Cook lashed the lifeboat to the boarding ladder, avoiding the fungus and wincing as the nylon rope cut into that shivering mass, making it bleed black again. "Just the same, Saks, you'll stay tied until we decide different."

"Which is probably forever," Fabrini told him.

Cook took the gun and stuck a chemical lightstick inside his shirt. Fabrini took the knife and then they started up. The boarding ladder trembled as Cook put his weight on it. It groaned and moved, but did not collapse. He could feel the steps giving slightly under his boots, but he decided they would probably hold him.

Fabrini wasn't crazy about boarding the derelict, that much was obvious, but he wasn't about to chicken out. Particularly in front of Saks. Regardless of the situation, the macho games between them persisted.

About half way up, as the mist seeping from the water and weeds began to make the lifeboat below look hazy, Fabrini said, "Look at that, Cook. You see that?"

Cook did. It looked like a series of long, jagged furrows in the hull like something had scratched the ship lengthwise. Cook figured he didn't want to know what caused them.

"Looks like she scraped up against something," he said.

"Or something scraped up against *her*."

3

When they reached the main deck, they just stood there, feeling the ship and certain it was feeling them, too. Much of the decks were obscured in fog and what they could see was a maze of hunched shapes and shadows, the bridge rising up above them. They walked along, Cook in the lead, past the upraised horns of stokeholds and ventilators, the blocklike deckhouses and high, circular gun turrets.

"Must have been a warship," Cook said, "with guns like that."

"At least they had some firepower when they ended up here."

The decks creaked beneath them like doors in rotting houses. To Cook, the entire ship was like some huge casket thrust up from a grave, a nitrous and moldering thing full of dank secrets and viscid, crawling shadows. The atmosphere was blighted and noxious, filled with a gnawing sort of spiritual pestilence that he could feel right down into the marrow of his bones. There was an almost palpable odor of putrescence and age. Everything was rusty and leaning and going to rot. There were great, gaping holes eaten through the decks and bulkheads as if acid had been liberally sprinkled about. All in all, it was grim and haunted and forbidding, the sort of place that made something inside you pull up and hide.

They moved aft, carefully checking the strength of the decks as they went, for it looked as if the entire ship wanted to collapse beneath them. When they got beneath the skeletal, reaching arms of those booms and derricks, they saw that they were enshrouded in ropes of fungus.

"Like wax," Fabrini said. "Dripping and running everywhere."

Cook said it was enough and they made their way forward back to the bridge or wheel-house. Snaking fingers of fog and sinister, clutching shadows oozed from riven bulkheads and askew hatches. The stink of the ship was moldy and vaporous, thick and aged and repulsive. If anything indeed lived on that ship, it could be nothing good, nothing remotely wholesome . . . whatever could breed under such conditions, they didn't want to look it in the face. From time to time, Cook felt a slight rumble below decks as if some morbid weight were shifting down there, waking up and sucking in that pestiferous air.

When the bridge was above them, they paused, both breathing fast and not from exertion.

"Should we . . . should we maybe go back?" Fabrini asked, so very hopeful it was almost hard to tell him no.

But Cook did tell him no. "We should go up and check out the bridge, see if we can find anything. You want," Cook said, taking hold of the ladder that led up there, "you can wait down here."

Fabrini looked around through the shadows and tendrils of searching mist. "Yeah, fuck you, too. Let's go."

It was almost humorous to Cook seeing Fabrini act this way. Oh, he understood the fear, all right, for it was on him, too, just as tight as sweat . . . but to see Fabrini scared shitless, well it was almost comical. A guy like that with all those muscles.

Cook climbed the ladder with Fabrini coming up beneath him. Neither man

looked down until they were safely on the catwalk outside the boxish, rectangular wheelhouse. Up there, they had a view of the ghostly fog closing around the ship, the endless expanse of weeds and the mist rising from them like smoke. Looking out there into that haunted world, it was not hard to believe in sea monsters, ghost ships . . . and worse things.

"Quite a view," Cook said.

"Yeah, enough to make you wanna slit your wrists."

Unlike most ship's wheelhouses which seemed to have a preponderance of circular portholes, the wheelhouse here had large square ports. All of them were black and filthy and Fabrini couldn't even scrape them clean with his knife.

Cook found the door and it was unlocked. But it was laden with rust and they had to hammer it with their shoulders to get it open even two feet. It made a groaning sound like nails pulled from old boards and then seized-up completely. They could neither open it or close it after that.

Inside it was black as a mineshaft.

Cook stood there, feeling that darkness and asking himself if he really wanted to go in there.

"Well?" Fabrini said.

Cook snapped the lightstick against his knee and led the way in. The air was dry and stale, motes of dust the size of snowflakes drifting in the glare of the lightstick. They moved around carefully, afraid they'd fall through a hole or gore themselves on a jagged shelf of metal. And maybe, just maybe, they were afraid that something with long white fingers and eyes like red ice would take hold of them.

"Christ, it smells like a tomb in here," Fabrini said.

And that was close, Cook decided. A sarcophagus that had been brought up from abyssal depths. It smelled of brine and mildew, rust and antiquity. There was another odor, too, something just plain dirty that he did not like.

"Look," Fabrini said. "A lantern."

He pulled it off a hook and let Cook see it. Cook took it, saw the shadow of kerosene sloshing around inside. He pulled a pack of waterproof matches from his pocket that he'd taken from the survival equipment. He struck one off the riveted bulkhead and wild, jumping shadows paraded around them. The wick was bone dry and it caught almost immediately.

"Let there be light," he said, turning up the valve until the bridge was flickering with orange-yellow illumination.

That's when they got their first good look at the room they were in. It was long and rectangular with life rings on the bulkheads, everything covered in a thick, furry layer of dust. They uncovered an old-fashioned shortwave radio set that was tarnished green. The ship's compass was thick with sediment. The bridge telegraphs for the port and starboard engines were both locked tight with rust and completely immovable. There was so much grime on the bridge rail that Cook didn't realize it was brass until he brushed against it and revealed the gleaming metal below. And the ship's wheel itself was threaded with cobwebs and clotted with dust.

None of what they saw had been touched in decades.

"Christ," Fabrini said, examining a brass tripod telescope. "How long has this ship

been derelict? A hundred years or what?"

Cook just shook his head, led them off into another room. This one had a large, flat table and things like rolled-up posters in slots along the far wall.

"Chart room, I'd guess," Cook said, setting the lantern into an inch of collected dust on the table.

There were copper chart tubes and navigational books set in low shelves. A nickel-plated aneroid barometer hung above them. Beneath that down of dust, the table was crowded with old navigational instruments — dividers and parallel rulers, three-armed protractors and quadrants. Cook found a sextant in a wooden case with mirrors and shades. In another case, there was a ship's chronometer.

He was figuring that back in the real world some of this stuff might have been worth money to collectors.

Most of the books were in poor condition, worm-holed with pages bloated from moisture and bindings crumbling with dryrot. Fabrini examined a few and the pages flaked away beneath his fingers like autumn leaves. Some were in better condition, but most were deteriorating and set with a webby sort of mold. He found an especially large book that looked to be leather-bound. Most of the pages were stuck together and those that weren't were spotted with a black mildew.

"Looks like the ship's log," Cook said, bringing the lantern closer.

Fabrini nodded. "Yeah . . . *U.S.S. Cyclops?* Yeah, says it right on top of the page. Ever heard of her, Cook?"

He shook his head. "A warship like we thought, though."

"How in the hell did a Navy ship end up here?"

"How do you think?"

Cook examined the fine spidery writing that had gone a copper color with age. Most of the pages tore when he tried to part them and it was a matter of reading fragments in-between the spots of mildew. Cook leafed through it, found many of the pages in the back in fairly good condition though warped from water stains.

"Christ, these entries . . . the most recent ones . . . all date from the First World War. 1917, 1918. Nothing beyond that." He looked at Fabrini in the yellow light. "The *Cyclops* has been here a long time, I guess."

Fabrini swallowed, but didn't say anything.

Cook kept reading, trying to put together the last weeks before the ship ended up in the Dead Sea. Fabrini was getting impatient, but knew there was something important here, if they could just put it together.

"Apparently," Cook said after a time, "apparently, the *Cyclops* was some sort of collier, a coal ship. She was spending a lot of time in the South Atlantic fueling British ships. In mid-to-late February, 1918, she was down in Rio de Janeiro. Sounds like she was having engine problems. There were some sort of repairs made. She took on eleven thousand tons of manganese ore and was supposed to head directly up to Baltimore." Cook flipped through pages, tried to read through the mildew and separate stuck-together pages. "Apparently there was some kind of bullshit going on. The executive officer, a fellow named Forbes, was locked up by the captain. Guy name of Worley. A lot of these are his entries and they don't make much sense. I can barely read 'em."

Cook read on and explained to Fabrini what he was learning. In Brazil they'd

taken some three hundred odd passengers, mostly naval personnel from other ships returning home. But they'd also taken aboard some six military prisoners that were being sent to a naval prison in New Hampshire. Two of them had been implicated in the murder of another sailor and one was due to hang for it.

"They stopped in Barbados, I gather, and had dinner with some dignitaries there. Most of this is gone . . . but they left on March 4th making for Baltimore. Dammit, these pages are ruined. I'd like to know what happened next . . ."

Cook went about reading, getting really interested now while Fabrini was getting really impatient. He read on and on for ten or fifteen minutes, ignoring Fabrini's suggestions that they get out already and get back to the lifeboat.

"I don't like leaving those two crazies alone down there with Menhaus," he said.

"Just wait," Cook said. "Okay, next thing I can read worth a damn is March 13th. Apparently, the *Cyclops* was already lost, already caught in the fog and this sea. See, there's been turmoil on the ship. That exec officer, Forbes, he's doing all the entries now."

Cook said it was like a soap opera what happened next. During the week that was unreadable, just about everything had happened and he could only put it together from bits and pieces. They were caught in that fog and the crew either mutinied or came damn close to it. Captain Worley refused to listen to the engineer that the engines were in rough shape. Worley kept the ship at full steam, running her right into a gigantic island of weed that fouled up her props. By that time, there was no getting out. The port engine was pretty much toast. The starboard was completely seized-up. The *Cyclops* was marooned in the weeds — same weed mass it still sat in, Cook figured — and the crew was coming unglued. Worley, from what Cook could tell, sounded violent and irrational, a shitty navigator on the best of days. He was drunk more often than not and spent most of his time verbally and physically abusing the crew.

"Sounds like he wasn't fit for duty even before they sailed," Cook explained, mulling it all over. "Somewhere during that lost week, shit hit the fan. Worley, completely out of his head and tired of the men and their 'superstitious terror' and 'lack of fortitude', as he put it, decided to flex his muscles a little. He took those six prisoners out of the brig and marched them up on deck. In full view of the crew, he shot them all down. Right in the heads with a .45."

"Quite a guy," Fabrini said. "Sounds like Saks."

"After that, the crew overpowered Worley and locked him in his cabin, they freed Forbes, the Exec. Apparently, he'd been locked up by Worley for standing up to the captain after a sailor died violently. Sounds like it was Worley's fault, but nobody but Forbes had the balls to tell him so."

Forbes was popular, it seemed, he managed to hold the crew together, but the engines were beyond repair. There was no hope. During the night, or what passed for night in this place, a number of lifeboats were lowered and much of the crew and passengers set off into the fog. That was the last anyone ever heard of them.

"Read this," Cook said. "This is important."

Fabrini sighed, not too happy about the history lesson he was getting here. Leaning over the chart table, he began to read in that oily light:

15 March 1918 (position unknown)

Matters grow worse. Been in this damnable fog for nearly eight days now. Trapped in this seaweed bed with no avenue of escape open to us. Some of the men have suggested, and understandably, that we abandon the Cyclops as she is a death ship now, a derelict, a great tomb for us all unless we abandon her. But abandon to what? Into that awful, congested mist and steaming seaweed sea?

Though I dare not admit it to the crew, I fear there is no earthly deliverance from this place.

For this is not home. This is not the Atlantic. This is no sea one can locate on any chart. I cannot say where we are. As I was under incarceration when we sailed into the fog, I witnessed not a speck of it. What my officers and Dr. Asper have told me of it is grim indeed. Asper has alluded that he believes that we have transported to some unknown world or sphere of existence, through some unguessable conduit that may have to do with distortions of time and space. Although my knowledge of physics is limited, Asper tells me that we can liken this distortion to a crack in a wall, a hole through which we have fallen. Although it sounds fantastic, I concur. I have no choice. I recall a story by H.G. Wells in which a laboratory explosion hurdles a chemist into another, terrible dimension. Our fate is similar.

I wonder into what nightmares the crews of those purloined lifeboats have sailed . . .

16 March, 1918 (position unknown)

Although it sounds mad at the very least or a lurid chapter pulled from an equally lurid novel, I must record the horrors we have seen or sensed out in the fog. We have caught sight on two different occasions of some immense and luminous beast haunting the weed. It appears able to make itself glow at will. I cannot ascertain its shape, as I only caught a single glimpse of it. But it is immense in size. The men on watch claim to have seen long-necked things rising from the weeds and great brown worms the size of pythons. They also tell of odd patches of weed that move independently of the mass. It's incredible, to be sure, but I myself have seen some bat-like beast swooping out of the fog over the decks that I first took to be some gigantic moth.

I know we must leave the ship, but I wonder how long we would last in that haunted, primeval sea. For there is life out there, obscene and shadowy life . . .

17 March, 1918 (position unknown)

Captain Worley is completely insane now. I spoke with him earlier and that blustering, intolerant man I had known so well is forever gone now. What is left is but a shell. A mad, trembling thing that whimpers and screams, given to wild bouts of mania in which he points at things I cannot (and will not) see. In his calmer moments, all he speaks of is taking his own life before "them from out there get to me . . . for it will not be good." He is convinced that there is some arcane, hideous intelligence out in the fog, one that toys with us. He claims it comes through the bulkheads like a ghost when he is alone. That it "has eyes that watch and burn" and that its touch is like "a burning, poisoned ice."

I dearly wish it were only Worley that has been so plagued by dementia. But the remaining crew and passengers are like demented to varying degrees. The fog that enshrouds us is no common fog. Something about it gets inside men's minds and turns their thoughts black, turns their brains to rot. Yes, I have felt it, too, and do not dispute

the terrible influence it wields.

The morale of the ship is positively decayed. I have not abandoned hope, yet I fear it has abandoned me.

The next few entries were blotted out with mildew. Fabrini wanted to stop right there, but Cook wouldn't have it. He wanted Fabrini to know the rest. To know what he now knew. So, swearing under his breath, Fabrini skipped to the next legible entry that Cook had his finger on:

20 March 1918 (position unknown)

I have not slept in days now. I dare not. Reading through my entries of the past two days, it seems that I have been near-hysterical. They read like the ravings of a madman. But who can claim not to be mad in this hellish place? I will not go into the things that crawl up the sides of the ship or the loss of the lifeboat and crew to that repellent octopoid monstrosity in plain view of us on the main deck. The less said of such nightmares, the better. Just let me put down here that events have taken a decidedly dark turn. There has been a rash of suicides amongst the crew and passengers. Men have vanished on watch and others right out of their staterooms. Worley is gone now, too. We discovered a hole in the bulkhead of his cabin as if something had chewed its way through steel to get at him. Insane or not, Worley was right about one thing: there is something intelligent in the fog. Some haunter of the dark, some creeping bogey that has slithered up from the pits of primal fear all men carry within their souls. I have felt its influence. It is a cold and deranged intellect, a lunatic shadow out of space and time that watches from the fog and picks clean the minds of men as of a vulture with carrion. Yes, it is driving everyone mad and I with them. The men claim it calls to them out of the fog in the voices of dead loved ones, that it shows them things that are destroying their minds. I will not speak of what it has shown me. God help us all. For each night it gets closer and plucks more men into that noisome mist . . .

21 March 1918 (position unknown)

Trapped in the weed we are and trapped in the weed we shall remain. Out of frustration more than anything else, I ordered a motorized whaleboat be dropped. The beasts in the weed have been quiet of late, but not that other thing out there. That ghost or whatever it might be called. I ordered the whaleboat lowered, so that I and a select crew including the ship's surgeon, Dr. Asper, might reconnoiter our position in hopes of finding some possibility of salvation. The mental strain on the crew and passengers is such now, that command has nearly broken down and they have formed into little groups or enclaves which violently oppose one another. There have been several instances now of barbarity. I fear that, given time, the crew and passengers remaining will descend into savagery. Something has to be done. For the sake of our lives and souls, we must take action.

(later)

We rowed through the weeds and once clear, motored our way through the clear channels of the sea. Although "clear" is a bit subjective, considering where we are. The water is pinkish and heavy, scummed with a trembling slime that reminds me of gelatin. Clumps of weeds and rotting debris of all sorts drift through it. Dr. Asper commented that this unknown sea is akin to an organic soup.

An hour out, we sighted a steamship languishing in another mass of weeds. We

decided to board her and I wish to God we had not. We used a grappling ladder to climb over the bulwarks. According to the trailboard on the bridge, she is . . . or was . . . the Korsund out of Copenhagen. Though slimed with a weird fungus and great growing patches of moss, she was a fine-looking steamer. Straight up-and-down bow and graceful stern. The superstructure was a maze of derricks and booms, spiderwebbed by a profusion of cables and overhead supports. She had tall twin stacks and high ventilators, a fine long deckhouse. Yes, she was a proud and hardy-looking vessel.

But she was derelict . . . though not, we discovered, empty.

We found great blackened sections on the main deck. Some of the bulkheads crumbled at our touch. I would guess that some intense, mysterious heat had been directed selectively against her. Inside the deckhouse, we found dozens of dead men. Many had killed themselves with razors or by hanging themselves. It was a ghoulish, awful sight. The ship itself had the atmosphere of a morgue, one of violated tombs and dissection rooms. We all felt it. We discovered men in their berths that had been burned to a crisp, oxidized into flaking mummies by a consuming, directed heat that did not so much as char the bedsheets or bolsters! Some of the men immediately began whispering of witchcraft and the like, though Dr. Asper and I do not believe any of this has such a pat, though disturbing explanation.

We found the captain in his cabin. In his chair, he had slit his wrists with a straight razor and was still gripping it. But his face . . . a mask of utter horror, those eyes staring at something we could not see. I got the mad impression that he killed himself before whatever it was he saw got to him.

In the wheelhouse, there were more cadavers. But these were not burnt or in any other way molested, save for numerous contusions. Dr. Asper examined them, telling me that they looked to have died of some horrendous seizures, that their bones were broken, limbs dislocated, abdominal muscles strained and ruptured. Most had bitten through their own tongues. They all bore the same looks of contorted horror as the captain — lips shriveled back from teeth, mouths locked in screams, faces pulled into psychotic masks, eyes bulging. And their eyes, dear Christ, I have never seen such a thing. They were completely white, though not glazed as from putrefaction, but as if the color had been leeched from them or what they had looked upon had been so harrowing and frightful that it had bleached the pigment free.

Later, Dr. Asper attempted a crude autopsy on one of these cadavers in the Korsund's meager surgery. He told me that its nervous tissue in general was actually reduced to a sort of pulp. That its brain was nothing more than a sort of runny slime as if said brain was boiled to a soup in its own skull. And what, we wondered, could cause such awful seizures and violent contractions? Could literally melt a man's brain in his own skull and bleach his eyeballs white?

Examination of several others showed the same degree of damage. Also, Dr. Asper discovered that their internal organs had been dissolved down to a sort of white jelly that burned his hands when he touched it. We found similar globs of this burning jelly in various parts of the ship. It has an unusual sort of shine to it. Even Dr. Asper, with his scientific leanings, cannot explain this jelly.

After some three hours aboard the Korsund, that malign and shadowy death ship, we departed. Some of the men were nearly hysterical with the horrors they saw and those

they sensed, but could not see. What appalling tragedy has befallen her? And when, I wonder, will it come for the Cyclops?

24 March 1918

Several days now since last entry. I have no good news, nothing which will save those that look to me for answers which are far beyond my grasp. Dr. Asper fears that the crew I put aboard the Danish ship has been contaminated with some nameless pestilence. They bear terrible burns on the exposed flesh of their hands and arms as if they came into contact with some intense heat. Dr. Asper says the burns are quite similar to radium burns. The men are plagued by fatigue and melancholy, terrible weakness and severe vomiting. Asper is doing his best, but the men grow steadily worse. Dr. Asper, too, I fear is contaminated, but will not admit as such.

Though I exhibit no outward signs of the unknown malady, I find myself increasingly nauseous and listless, unable to eat. My mind is given to dream and I do not trust my own judgement.

Whatever terrifying specter circles us out in the fog, it grows nearer by the day and several times now I have been certain I saw something huge and unspeakable slipping through the mists. Perhaps it is only my fevered imagination, but I do not think so. It has placed a curse over this undead sea and the Cyclops in particular. I cannot say what this haunter is or even guess at its nature, but that it is an evil, hungering taint I have no doubt. It has cocooned the ship up now with invisible threads and slowly, patiently, it is sucking our blood dry drop by terrible drop.

I pray for death.

29? March 1918

There is death now, a grim and covetous death that haunts the ship. Day by day by night more men disappear. Some have escaped into the mist by taking lifeboats. I wish them godspeed. Others have been liberated as well, but not of their own free will. This morning, I believe it was this morning, we discovered the cadavers of three men who vanished several days ago. How can I describe their remains to you? They were leathery, empty husks, their faces like crumbling Autumn leaves, webbed up in some wiry silk that is so sharp it slips through fingers if you merely brush or touch it. The cadavers were wound in this like flies in a spider's web and hung from the aft coaling booms. We found them dangling there like corpses from a gallows. With some ingenuity, Holmes, the boatswain, managed to cut them down by climbing up there and sawing through the wire filaments that held them with a hacksaw. Dr. Asper is too sick now to examine the bodies. I tried, but even prodding one of them with a knife caused it to shatter as if it were made out of some fragile glass. The bodies have been drained dry of liquid and crystallized. Frozen? I do not know and cannot guess.

I am in poor shape. I move now and exist through sheer force of will. I have not eaten in days and my flesh is sore to the touch as if rubbed raw with rocksalt. I vomit blood regularly. There are less than two dozen of us now.

April 1918?

Very weak now. See omens and portents everywhere. Have seen no one in days now or is it weeks? Sounds coming from the mist as of a million shrieking birds or a buzzing as of bees or wasps. I do not listen to that which scratches at the door, those terrible puckered white faces which peer through the portholes. A huge, globular moon

has risen above the mist now and it is the color of fresh blood that paints the decks and superstructure with a red fire. Feel a kinship with the beasts of the haunted sea and fog. For though alien, they are living, are flesh and blood. That which buzzes and shrieks above and below is not corporeal in my understanding of the word. It is a disembodied appetite, a malignant sentience that hungers and hungers stuffs itself with the bones and souls of men grows fat like a spider on human suffering and horror. I must finish this entry must before I hide myself away

Not sure now but I must be alone alone I shut my ears tight against that which haunts the ship that which screams and laughs and calls to me that ravening faceless nightmare

cursed iam cursed imust be cursed it comes now and i feel its heat and cold that which slithers and hisses and fills my brain with fever oh the cold burning light frozen crystalline eyes of cosmic fire

the buzzing buzzing

The log of the *Cyclops* ended here and for Fabrini and Cook, by God, it was enough. It was more than enough. For the things they had guessed, had sensed, had been alluded to by Crycek's lunacy, were sketched out in frenzied, baleful detail by Lieutenant Forbes, the executive officer of the *Cyclops,* a man who had been dead ninety years. What they were reading was a dire history, the thoughts of a man reaching out to them from the grave.

Fabrini slammed the book shut so forcefully it made Cook jump. "I don't need this shit, okay?" he said, his face pallid and his voice rusty and scraping. "I can't take this shit, Cook. And don't fucking tell me that sailor was just crazy, because I know better. You do, too. Oh Jesus Christ, Cook, I'm coming apart here, okay? Something's breaking up inside me and I don't know what to do . . ."

He was practically sobbing now.

Cook put an arm around him and the physical contact of another living, breathing human being seemed to steady him a bit.

Cook said, "Just take it easy. That shit happened in 1918."

Fabrini was breathing hard. "And it's going to happen again."

"Fabrini, listen to me-"

But Fabrini did not want to listen. "It's out there now, Cook, whatever got them. You've felt it and so have I." Fabrini's face looked almost ghoulish in the flickering lantern light. "And we're going to feel it again real soon. And you know what?"

Cook just shook his head.

Fabrini licked his lips, tried to swallow. "I'm scared shitless and so are you."

4

During the hour or so while Fabrini and Cook were gone, Saks tried every argument he could think of to get Crycek to turn him loose. But it was no good. Menhaus had fallen asleep in the bow, which left him alone with Crycek. And Crycek just stared at him, listening, but never speaking, seeming to find Saks's plight amusing.

Thirty minutes into it Saks began to threaten them, telling them how he was going to kill them when he finally got his hands free. Forty-five minutes into it he had lapsed into a glum, stony silence. Crycek kept watching him, burning holes through him with those crazy eyes of his. Menhaus ignored him. The graveyard stillness was what was eating away at Saks. Now and then there would be a slopping, sliding sound from off in the weed or a muted splash from out in the mist, but that was about it. Other than a mysterious droning sound that seemed to come from far off now and again, there was nothing.

Silence. Brooding and secret and infinite.

That and the sound of Menhaus snoring.

Finally, Crycek said, "Do you feel it, Saks? Do you feel it out there waiting for us?"

"Quit with the mind games, Crycek, it's getting boring," Saks told him.

But Crycek just smiled. "It's getting stronger. I can feel it and so can you . . . closer all the time. We're drifting closer to its black heart all the time."

"We're stuck in the weeds, you silly fuck, we ain't drifting anywhere."

"Still, we're drawn closer. Closer to those teeth and eyes and that cold, ravenous mind. Can you feel its mind, Saks? Feel it trying to find a way in? Because it is, you know, all the time." He looked out into the fog, then back at Saks. "Sometimes . . . sometimes it's so close I can almost touch it. But it's always scratching at the back of my mind, trying to find a way in"

Menhaus blissfully slept through the exchange.

Saks laughed without mirth. "It gets in your mind, it's gonna find one big vacancy."

"Is it already inside you, Saks? The thing? Is it inside you even now?"

"Shut the hell up," Saks told him.

What he wanted badly right now was to get his hands free, because when that happened, Crycek was gonna be in a world of hurt. Saks hadn't decided yet whether he was going to wrap those hands around his throat or just thumb the bastard's eyes right out of their sockets. But something was going to happen. And Crycek wasn't going to like it much.

Crycek suddenly gripped his head in his hands and out in that cloying mist, that weird droning rose up, faded away just as quick. "Jesus . . . it's *thinking* about us, Saks. I can feel it . . . feel it in my head. It knows what we're feeling and seeing . . . it can read our minds . . ."

Saks felt something cold under his skin now like a killing frost. "Read my mind?" he said. "Let it read my fucking mind. Hey! You out there! Read my mind right now! Go ahead . . . you ain't gonna like what I'm thinking!"

But it was sheer bravado, a thin veneer and nothing more. For inside, Saks was cold and squirming and he badly wanted to scream. He had decided that Crycek was full of bullshit with this *devil* of his . . . yet, yet, he could almost feel something in his mind, a whisper of motion like the fluttering wings of a moth.

Two minutes later, he was certain he had imagined it all.

"Gone . . . it's gone now, Saks," Crycek said, chewing on the knuckles of his right hand. "But it'll be back . . . maybe . . . maybe it already got Fabrini and Cook. Maybe that's what happened."

"They'll be back," Saks said, without much conviction. "Sure they will. When . . . when Cook gets tired of bouncing his balls off Fabrini's chin, they'll be back."

But Crycek shook his head. "Maybe not. Maybe we're already alone . . . just you and me, Saks. And Menhaus."

"Be my fucking luck."

Crycek laughed now, but it was a demented sort of laugh like a knife scraped over glass. "If they don't come back . . . I wonder, I just wonder which of us that thing will take. Me or you? Maybe it'll just want *one* of us." Crycek's eyes were blazing now. "Yeah . . . maybe it just wants a sacrifice, Saks, a *human sacrifice.* If that's what it wants, maybe I'll just have to give it one. I just happen to know a guy who's already tied up . . ."

5

When Gosling relieved Soltz on watch, Soltz was looking funny . . . dreamy. There was an odd haze in his eyes, a faraway look like maybe he was not there at all, just lost in distant places and unseen horizons that Gosling himself could never reach.

"You okay, Soltz?"

Soltz seemed to realize for the first time that he was not alone. He looked at Gosling, blinked, and focused his eyes behind those heavy glasses. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. Just fine."

"What were you looking at out there?"

But he just shook his head. "You see funny things in the fog, don't you?"

"What sort of funny things?"

Soltz thought it over. Something pulsed at his throat and his eyes went shiny and distant again. "Things that aren't there. Those things I saw . . . they couldn't really be there, could they?"

"What did you see?"

Soltz shook his head again. He opened his mouth, then shut it. He looked off into the fog and Gosling did, too. It did not look any different. Swirling and thick, sparkling and yellow-white like a drive-in movie screen.

"I saw a ship out there," Soltz said. "I know I didn't really see it, maybe just with my mind . . . but it was so real."

"Tell me about it."

Soltz narrowed his eyes, seeing it again now. "Well . . . it was an odd ship, a big ship. But not a modern ship at all. One of those old ones like maybe a barque, a pirate ship . . . yes, that's what it was, a *pirate ship.* It had high masts . . . except they were ragged and full of holes, gray and sagging. I heard it out in the fog, creaking and groaning, wind whistling through the torn canvas . . . then it came out and I saw it. It had a funny glow to it, you know? There were men along the railing and they were ragged, too. Dead men . . . ghosts . . . skeletons. They looked like skeletons . . . isn't that odd? Like skeletons."

Gosling sighed, did not like it. "A ghost ship? Is that what you saw?"

"Yes . . . I think so. It just went past us and faded into the mist." He squinted his eyes and cocked his head. "It went past us and there was a woman aboard . . . a woman. She waved to me. And you know what, Gosling?"

"What?"

"She didn't have any eyes."

Gosling felt a chill lay over his skin now. The idea of what Soltz had seen was scaring him, yet Soltz seemed fine with the idea. And that was probably the worst part. Like maybe his mind was going now, was coming apart to the point that he did not recognize fear and danger.

"Go lay down, Soltz, you need a rest."

Soltz nodded. "What . . . no, it's my imagination again. I thought I heard it out there, creaking and groaning, the sound of feet on its decks, pacing and pacing."

"Go lay down," Gosling told him.

“I didn’t really see it, did I?”

Gosling told him that he hadn’t, but deep down he honestly had to wonder. Wonder what might next come drifting out of the mist and if it was a ghost ship, would it keep ghosting by . . . or would it decide to stop?

6

Fabrini seemed better after he admitted his fears openly.

Cook was sure he would want to get off the ship right away, but he seemed to be in no hurry. In fact, when they'd climbed back down to the decks below, he just stood there.

"You know something, Cook? You know what I been thinking?" he said, looking not afraid now, but just angry. "I'm thinking that I'm just plain tired of wandering around with my fucking tail between my legs. I've had it. I'm not the sort of guy who gets like this, ready to piss himself over ghost stories. I figure that whatever got the crew here, it wants me, let it take its best shot. Because I sure as hell won't make it easy."

"That's good thinking," Cook told him. "Reading that log made me start thinking some things myself."

"What kind of things?"

"Well . . . maybe I'm wrong, but what if Crycek is right: what if this thing *needs* our fear, feeds off it? What if it gets stronger on paranoia and anxiety and things like that? What if? Then, I don't know, maybe if we don't let it see that we're scared, maybe it'll get weaker."

"Makes sense to me. Let's show that fucker what we're made of. Let's do some exploring."

That really came as a shock to Cook, but he took it as he took all things with neither a smile nor a frown. They found a hatch and went below decks, down into the damp darkness. And down there, in the shadows and stink, it wasn't quite so easy to puff out your chest. For if the atmosphere had been forbidding above, it was positively rancid below.

Using the lantern, they began exploring the mazelike passages below decks. Cook figured it was going to be bad down there and he was right. There was an awful, gagging stink in the air that was worse than even the smell of the sea and weeds. This was a foul, suffocating odor of rank decomposition and noxious dissolution. Like something wet and moldy locked in a hot closet, boiling away in its own juices. A weird combination of organic decay and rusting machinery, stagnant water and mildewed woodwork . . . a half dozen other things neither man could identify or wanted to.

"I feel like a worm," Fabrini said. "A worm sliding through the carcass of something dead."

It was right on target, but created such an absurd visual that Cook actually laughed . . . at least until he heard his laughter echoing back at him. No, none of it was funny. Not in the least. There were greasy, gray toadstools and furry green moss growing through rents in the bulkheads and more of that bloated fungus that was just as white and fatty as the flesh of a corpse pulled from a river. A hot, yeasty odor came off it.

Cook stepped on something soft and pulpy about the size of a cantaloupe and it went to juice under his boot. He jumped back with a cry, realizing what he'd stepped on was something like a puffball, a cloud of yellow spores spread out in the lantern light.

"You ever seen anything like this?" Fabrini asked,

Cook just shook his head.

The ship was dead, obviously, yet there was such a profusion of growth and morbid germination, it almost seemed like maybe it was moving from the inorganic to the organic. That given time, the *Cyclops* would be a seething diseased mushroom that only looked like a ship.

They moved on, ducking beneath ribbons of fungi, bringing light where there had only been moist darkness and bacterial action for decades. The air was saturated with a brackish sewer smell. Shadows pooled and bled like black blood. The bulkheads were thick with a slick yellow moss. Clots of fungus dropped from the ceiling overhead and hit the decks like rotten plums. Everything was creaking and groaning, dripping and oozing and stinking.

It was bad. God yes, it was bad.

But something in them, in both of them, pushed them on. Maybe it was some inexplicable, suicidal desire to see the very worst that floating mortuary could show them. Maybe they could be satisfied with nothing less. And maybe, after reading the ship's log and having their minds touched by those of the crew, they had to know what became of them.

Doors were either welded shut with rust or had bulging tongues of fungi seeping around their edges as if the cabins behind them were bursting with fungal growth. The fungus was on the decks, too, and they were walking right through it, their boots making gluey, sticky sounds as they lifted them with each step. Cook had brushed some of it on a bulkhead with the back of his hand and it had been warm and oily like the skin of a dying man.

They found another corridor and the fungi had not abated.

But one stretch of wall was free of it, was blackened and pitted as if a great fire had swept through there. Cook and Fabrini paused before a doorway. It was burnt black. When Cook prodded it with the barrel of the Browning it shattered like candy glass. It was entirely crystallized.

"Just like the log said," Fabrini pointed out. "That ship, the *Korsund,* remember? Forbes said it looked burned, that the walls fell apart when they touched them."

"Yeah, I remember."

Fabrini tapped the door with his knife and it fell apart like ice in a spring thaw. "What could cause something like this?" he wondered out loud.

Cook shook his head. "I'm not sure . . . it's like it was burned and then frozen immediately afterwards, you know? Like it was hit with a raging heat that weakened it and then dunked in a tank of liquid oxygen, frozen solid in a split-second. What else could weaken steel, make it like this?"

Now that the door was reduced to shards at their feet, Cook held the lantern in there. There was dust everywhere. And where there wasn't dust, there was more of that fungi. The floor was thick with it. It climbed up onto a bunk, was in the process of swallowing a desk-

"Jesus," Fabrini said, "look at that . . ."

Cook was looking. Seated at the desk was a skeleton dressed in dirty, dingy rags that might have been a uniform at one time judging from the tarnished buttons on the breast. The skull was thrown back, jaws sprung as if in a scream. The fungus had absorbed the yellowed skeleton right up to the ribcage, fingers of it snaking up to the

jawline. To Cook, with all that fungi on it, it looked like the skeleton was white wax that had melted down over the desk and pooled onto the floor. Because that's how it looked . . . like a Halloween candle.

The fungi seemed almost aware of the light on it, began to bleed droplets of diseased sap.

"You think . . ." Fabrini began. "You think that might be-"

"Forbes," Cook said. "I'll bet it is."

He didn't comment on what they were seeing anymore than that. The sickly yellow light of the lantern created wavering shadows, made the skeleton look like it was leaning forward, then back, made the skull grin like it was laughing at them.

And maybe it was.

Because it knew things they did not. It knew plenty of things that they would not know until it was too goddamn late to do anything about them. It sat there, laughing in its sea of fungus and ancient rot, flashing a toothy mortuary grin. Filled to bursting with a grim, macabre mirth. You could almost hear it saying: *Well, well, fucking well . . . look what the cat dragged in . . . or will soon drag out. Almost ninety years I've been waiting for someone and now here you are looking in on me, isn't that sweet? And you want to know what it was like when I was clothed in flesh, when good dutiful Lieutenant Forbes was a man and not a fungal wraith? Yes, you want to know what it was like for him, sitting in here, waiting and waiting, hearing voices and lost souls whispering in the corridor, things scratching and clawing and hissing his name. How it was for him, his mind gone to a soft quivering rot because he knew he was alone and that thing was coming to claim him. You want to know what it was like, him sick with radiation poisoning . . . because that's what it was and you know it. The breath of that thing is radiation, a wasting frozen atomic fission born in black godless cosmic voids . . . the sort of radiation that melts holes through the fabric of time and space and is a cold fire burning in your guts until you vomit out your insides in glistening, greasy loops. Yes, that's what it was like for Forbes. His guts coming up his throat and then that doorway suddenly radiant with a flickering, supercharged energy that was so very bright it was actually the purest form of darkness, the absolute darkness of black holes and dead stars. Then it came through the door, passing straight through the metal because solid matter is like a mist to it and that's when Forbes saw it, something immense, something sinister and intensely alien. Something that perverted three-dimensional space with its very arcane, impossible existence. An obscenity ancient and undying born in a tenebrous antimatter firmament of sentient slime where physics and geometry are screaming, cabalistic cancers. This, my friends, is what our good Lieutenant Forbes saw. What he feasted upon and what feasted upon him. Something lunatic and profane in appearance, a violation of known space that squeezed his brain dry like a sponge just seeing it. A crawling and slithering accumulation of arcing colors and flesh that was not flesh but smoke . . . colors with texture and sound and smell . . . writhing, hideous waxen colors that looked into him with green crystal eyes that bleached his own eyes white and boiled his brain to soup just looking upon them, turned his gray matter to a white radioactive jelly that ran from his ears and eyes and mouth . . .*

All of it, whether memory or psychic invasion, blasted through Cook's brain in a searing wave that left him gasping, a choked whimpering in his throat. His head spun and

he fell into Fabrini who held him up, scared now, wanting to know what in the hell was happening. But Cook could not tell him. Could not tell him anything. Because he had seen it, he had seen and felt and physically witnessed the merest fraction of Forbes' final moments and it left him wriggling with a fear that was so big, so total, it blotted out everything for a moment . . . even his own mind. He stood there, hanging onto Fabrini and for a few, lunatic moments his mind had been washed clean like a blackboard and he did not know who he was or where he was. And then it all came surging back, leaving him breathless, his temples throbbing.

But what had it been?

Bones were just bones and they could not have sent those images into his head. Cook could not accept such things. Could not let himself go there. Pitted, yellow bones holding, after all these years, a distant and feral memory, a reflection, an echo of a horror beyond human experience . . . was it possible? Or was the answer far worse? Was it just a telepathic linkup to that thing's mind, its consciousness, letting him know but a sliver of the fate that was in store for him? For all of them?

"Jesus Christ," Fabrini was saying. "Are you all right?"

And Cook was nodding his head. "I think the air in here is bad or something. I got all woozy or something. I'm . . . I'm okay now."

Maybe Fabrini believed that and maybe he didn't.

Regardless, he led Cook up and out of those subterranean passages and onto the deck where the air was somewhat cleaner, fresher. Even the mist didn't look so bad after what was below.

After a time, Fabrini said, "Should we go back to the boat?"

"If you want."

But Fabrini shook his head. "Let's look around some more."

Apparently, whatever had gotten into Cook's head, it had not touched Fabrini. His zeal for exploring the ship had not lessened. Maybe it was being cooped-up in that lifeboat for so long. Maybe that's what it was. Even exploring a death ship and not knowing what new horror might show itself next did not make him want to leave.

But Cook thought: Of course not. Fabrini has a mission now. Exploration. And anything, even this damned ship, is better than waiting helpless in that lifeboat.

They went into a deckhouse aft and took the companionway below. There was much less fungus here, very little of it in fact. And the air was surely better, although the darkness was equally as claustrophobic. Eventually, they came to the engine room. It was a gigantic, vaulted place like an amphitheater set with mammoth steam turbines and attendant arteries of hoses and vents and pipes. There were a few inches of black, dirty water on the floor.

"I'd say she won't run," Fabrini said.

"I'm thinking you're right."

They chuckled over their little joke, moving around the turbines and pistons, Fabrini telling Cook how he wished to God he'd followed his first instinct and told Saks to stick the job up his ass. Because, honestly, he'd felt something was wrong with the entire thing, only he hadn't been able to put a finger on it.

They moved by lantern light into what might have been some kind of storeroom and right away they saw more death.

“Shit,” Fabrini said.

Shit was right. There were maybe a dozen skeletons tangled up in a central, bony mass like something scooped from a mass grave. But it wasn’t all those skulls and ribcages and jutting femurs that made them stop dead, it was *what was on them.*

Crawling, fluttering, purring things.

At first, Cook thought he was looking at living brains, brains with attached spinal cords creeping amongst the bones and rot and oily water. Just like in that old ‘50s B-movie with Marshal Thompson. But that’s not what he was seeing at all. Whatever they were, they had heads about the size of tea saucers, flattened out and connected to long, bifurcated tails set with fluttering cilia. They were fleshy and pale, making a thrumming noise that sounded very much like purring kittens.

They paid the intruders no mind.

Cook wasn’t sure whether they were insect or crustacean or a little of both. They were eyeless and grotesque, moving with an inching motion like slugs. They inspired a bone-deep atavistic loathing.

“Disgusting,” he said under his voice.

“Sea lice,” Fabrini said. “Those are fucking sea lice. Salmon get ‘em. Other fish, too. I saw ‘em on TV . . . but only under a microscope. Not this big . . . these things are a hundred times the size of sea lice . . .”

The things moved through the bones and into the water beneath, staying there. Revolting as they were, Cook figured Fabrini was probably right. Just sea lice grown to vast proportions in this netherworld. Mutants in the real world, but just harmless critters here in this place.

“Let’s go,” Fabrini said. “Let’s check out the cabins above.”

“All right. Then we better get back. I don’t like leaving Menhaus in charge too long.”

And up to the cabins they went.

7

They unzipped the canopy on the raft, deciding to take their chances because of what they had heard: a foghorn.

The others had been awake, lost in their own little worlds. Soltz had been asleep . . . and suddenly he sat right up, looking shocked and frightened, eyes glassier than the spectacles covering them. “I heard it,” he said. “I heard it.”

“What?” George said, thinking maybe he had heard something, too.

“Go back to sleep,” Gosling said. “You were just dreaming.”

But they all heard it then. That low moaning sound coming through the mist and it could be nothing but the throaty bellow of a foghorn. It sounded again about five minutes later and this time it was even closer. George, who had been thinking maybe it was the mournful call of some sea serpent like in that Ray Bradbury story, suddenly changed his mind.

It was a goddamn foghorn, all right.

So they unzipped the canopy and sat under the inflated arches, listening and looking and waiting. For they were all thinking the same thing: a foghorn? Well, that could only mean one of two things. Either there was a ship out there or there was a lighthouse. And the idea of one seemed just as ludicrous as the other, but they dismissed neither. God only knew what that fog had pulled into this place through the centuries.

“It can’t be gone, not already,” Soltz said.

Gosling told him to be quiet. He wanted everyone listening. If there was a boat out there blowing its horn, then he wanted to know where it was.

Five minutes later, the horn sounded again.

And what a beautiful, haunted sound it was. A deep baritone crying out in the mist, calling stray ships to safety like a mother calling in her young, warning of toxic mists and rocky headlands, reefs that liked to set their teeth into unwary hulls. It was so loud it actually made the rubber skin of the raft vibrate when it sounded.

“Christ,” George said, “we gotta be right on top of it. Where the hell is it?”

But they could see nothing.

Maybe it was close and maybe it was far, maybe it was an echo sounding from another world, just a noisy ghost that would tempt them with hope and then shatter it just as quick. Regardless, the men in the raft could not see it for the fog would not allow it, it would not part and there was no prophet’s voice to make it do so. It hung on, thick and thicker, roiling and swirling and encasing, an ethereal roof and four enclosing walls, a ghost-sheath that covered and constricted and tucked tight. The warm sea brewed it and the chill air blew it into life, a miasma of gases and vapors and dank moisture that was semi-luminous via its own otherworldly chemistry.

“Fucking soup,” Gosling said. “If we could only see through it . . .”

Sometime later, the foghorn sucked in a breath and sounded again, but this time it was distant and lonely and lost. Eerie-sounding, like some behemoth roaring as it submerged. And when it came again, it was barely audible.

“Gone,” Soltz said, despair on him thick as ice. “Just . . . gone. We’ll drift until the flesh falls from our bones.”

"Knock it off," Gosling said, really not in the mood for a pity-party.

"It doesn't make any damn sense," Cushing said. "I mean, yeah, we're *drifting,* but we're not moving that fast. We're not clipping along at sixty miles an hour here. That foghorn couldn't have been more than a hundred yards away in the mist . . . yet we passed it like we're in a racing boat."

"It's the physics of this place . . . they're fucked up," was George's scientific take on it.

After that, there was silence.

Nothing to say and nothing that could be said that would make sense of it or lessen the tremendous let-down they all felt. Nothing to do but sit quietly and stare off into that fog which was huge and billowing and sure of itself. Sure that it had them secreted away where they would never be found.

George was staring into that clotted, stagnant sea, watching patches of weeds float by, feeling the raft skid around weed masses that were thick and verdant. That's when he saw something just behind the raft, something dark spreading out down there like an oil slick, a few inches beneath the surface.

Looks like an old coat down there, he thought, *a tarp or something.*

But he knew it wasn't any of those things, not here, and he wished to God it would just go away. But it wasn't going away, he saw, it was drifting along with them like a kite tangled in the sea anchor.

George crept back a bit from the stern of the raft. He really wasn't sure why, but there was something he did not like about that kite. It inspired a weakness in his belly. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he'd been in the Dead Sea long enough now to respect his own apprehensions.

He stared at it . . . it moved. Fluttered, something.

The air in his lungs felt oddly dry and prickly. There was a tenseness at the back of his neck, a certainty that this was not just something tangled in the anchor line, but something that *chose* to be there. Not accidental in the least.

"What're you doing over there, George?" Gosling asked him.

"There's something caught on the anchor line . . . I think," he said. "I'm not really sure."

"Well, don't worry about it."

"It looks alive."

That got everyone's attention. Except for Soltz who just sat up front, brooding and unreachable. Cushing came back by George and looked at the shape in that dark water.

"Looks like a skate, kind of," he said.

And before George could tell him to just leave it be, Cushing grabbed an oar and jabbed it with the tip. It gave easily, sank down deeper into the darkness.

And then it came back up. Fast.

Like maybe it was pissed-off and it wasn't the sort of thing that took kindly to being prodded with oars. You leave me alone, I leave you alone. You mess with me . . . look out, Charlie.

George thought maybe he let out a little involuntary cry when the thing came up out of the water and slime. It was flapping great wings or fins and he couldn't decide which they were. Just that they spread out about six-feet tip to tip. It came up, flapping

those wings and spraying the raft with water, looking oddly like a devil-ray that had learned how to fly. It hovered behind the raft like a moth at a windowpane, getting no closer, but surely getting no farther away. It carried a nauseating, briny stink to it like sun-boiled seaweed.

"Keep away from it!" Gosling warned them, taking out another flare in case he had to give this monstrosity a taste.

It was roughly diamond-shaped, with long triangular wings or pectoral fins. Its body was streamlined like that of a manta ray, flattened-out with the cartilaginous flesh of a shark. A dirty slate-gray above and mushroom-white below. There were a series of horizontal slits below where the wings met its body, maybe gill slits, and hooked brown claws, two on each wing tip. It had a long whiplike tail with raised, barbed spines that looked much like the needles of a pufferfish.

George and the others had moved clear of the stern now.

"If I had a gun," Gosling said. "I'd shoot the ugly cocksucker . . ."

And it *was* ugly. Plain dirt-ugly. Something you saw crawl out from under a log that you instinctively stepped on without giving it a chance. George was feeling it, too, though he could not exactly describe even to himself the disgust this thing inspired. He didn't want to kill it exactly . . . but he sure as hell didn't want to hug it. It was simply so offensive and outrageous in form, it made you want to look at it. Like a couple spiders mating, you watched even though the idea of it made your flesh crawl and your guts pull up in sickening yellow waves.

It belonged in a jar or stuffed in a museum . . . but it did not belong alive and vital

It's just a dumb animal, he told himself, *it's just being curious. It'll get bored and leave. Sooner or later.*

It reminded him of some weird mutant death'shead moth. Almost.

One that had mated with some slimy thing from a primordial sea.

And the thing-whether bird or bat or fish — just hovered there, looking much like a kite as George had thought. Its wings flapped and its body tipped forward, then back, as if it were balancing itself. When it tipped back, George could see that it had a series of small remora-like parasites hanging from its belly. They looked like deflated balloons. When it tipped forward, he saw that it had something like a head, a narrow disk lacking eyes but set with four pale yellow segmented stems like lobster antenna that were whipping about. They were tipped with bright pink nodules that looked something like eyes, but were probably some sort of sensory apparatus.

And it had a mouth . . . a vertical gash that moved side to side rather than up and down like the jaws of a spider. Beyond that maw, you could see not teeth, but a slick and squirming tongue-like projection of tissue that was just as white as a ghost-pipe. As they watched, it uncoiled like rope from spool and came out tasting the air. It was hollow as a garden hose and about the same thickness, jutting in and out of the mouth maybe six or eight inches like a frog's tongue after a fly.

Cushing jabbed the oar in its direction and it jerked back, but did not leave. If anything, it came a little closer now, just hovering there like a hummingbird, those wings fluttering and vibrating madly.

"What the hell are we gonna do?" George asked.

As if it heard him, it started making a weird hissing sound, sort of a repetitive

whirring like a grasshopper in a distant field.

Gosling said, “I hate to waste a flare on it . . . but I don’t like the looks of it.”

“Well, somebody do something!” Soltz told them, tired of all this inaction and equally tired of staring at that monstrosity like something that had winged itself free of a B-movie. “We just can’t sit here!”

And maybe the thing heard that or perhaps it just sensed the stress in Soltz’s voice or maybe it had just been biding its time . . . but Soltz saying that was like a catalyst. Like something had jabbed the thing’s asshole with an electric cattle prod. It pulled back, dipped low over the water and came back up. Looked like it might just call it a day and then it came on with attitude.

It swooped right over the top of the raft, one of those claws on its wing tip brushing against one of the arches and slitting it clean open. It swooped again before anyone had a chance to do more than hear the *hssssss* of the arch deflating and it caught another arch.

Gosling was yelling, “Watch it! Watch it! Keep your fucking heads down!”

And everyone was ducking and shouting and scrambling madly to keep out of its way. Making that weird, trilling *th-th-th-th* sound, it swooped down again. Cushing ducked under its lethal bulk and George almost did. But as he threw himself to the deckplates, he instinctively threw up his arm to shield his face and one of those brown claws scratched him from elbow to wrist. And that’s all it was, just a scratch. If it had been any more than that, he knew, it would have taken his arm off like surgical steel. He lay there, as everyone shouted and Cushing kept swinging at that crazy bat with his oar, looking dumbly at his arm. At the scratch. Just a white abrasion, really. A white line that went pink, then red as it opened like lips, blood bubbling out.

And the bat-thing kept coming at them, darting in and out with an amazing speed and agility. The arches had been pretty much shredded by then, had collapsed like punctured balloons.

Gosling was trying to get a shot at it with the flare gun, but it moved too fast, kept hovering too close to the men and the raft. And what he didn’t want to do was to burn a hole through either.

Cushing gave it a couple good whacks with the oar and it felt the impact, but it seemed impervious. It was tough and leathery and built for battle. These soft pink-skinned things didn’t stand a chance.

And it was all bad enough up to that point and then things got a little worse.

It rose up above the raft and had it just sat still up there a few more seconds, Gosling might have been able to peg it, but it had no intention. It swooped back down like an enemy divebomber, one of its wings knocking the oar out of Cushing’s hands and went right after Soltz. It targeted him and went right at him, a bee descending on a flower.

Soltz turned to his side as it hit him, as it took hold of him with those hooks, bending its wings like arms. That long, whipping tail was snaking in the air. Gosling took hold of Cushing’s oar and hammered the thing with all he had. It made a squealing sound and that barbed tail whipped past Gosling’s face, just missing his eyes by a scant two inches.

The bat-thing wasn’t on Soltz long, but long enough to make him shudder with convulsions. Long enough so that Gosling saw that white, hollow tube of a tongue come

jabbing out and catch Soltz in the cheek, leaving a burning welt in its path . . . and a sickening odor of seared flesh.

And, yes, long enough to make Soltz scream.

And what a scream it was.

It was a mad, wailing hysterical sound that went right through everyone on the raft and echoed out through that lonesome fog like a child screaming from the bottom of a well.

It flapped and pulled away from Soltz, that tongue catching him one last time, knocking his glasses aside and wetting down his closed, pinched eyelid with a clear mucus. The effects of which were instantaneous: the thin flesh of his eyelid bubbled like hot plastic and melted into threads of skin that looked much like strands of rubber. And then he was really screaming, thrashing and writhing, his eyeball gone a shocking shade of red.

The raft was bobbing and jumping like a carnival ride. The bat-thing had rolled off Soltz, its wings hammering wildly in the raft as it tried to lift itself up. And Gosling had the oar still and as he brought it up to strike that thing, he realized in a split second of absolute revulsion that the thing's tongue, that it had been *tasting Soltz, seeing if he was worth eating,* and then he brought the oar down. He'd been aiming at the flat spade of its head, but what he actually hit were two of those wild twitching antennae. The oar snapped one of them clean off and bent another over like a broken reed.

The thing really squealed then, flapping and whirring and jumping until it rose up two or three feet, veered drunkenly to the side and crashed back into the sea. It was trying to fly or swim, but all it was doing was skating over the water in a circle like a dog chasing its own tail.

And Gosling knew suddenly and with complete conviction that those antennae were like some kind of general sensory organ . . . nose and ears and eyes all rolled into one. It was blind and helpless without them. He had struck the two on the left side of its head and now it could not get its bearings on that side.

But there wasn't much time to think about any of that.

Although its claws had done no more damage than slitting open three of the four arches-the fourth hanging over like a question mark now, bearing the weight of the other three-that barbed tail had lanced the port gunwale whose chambers were even now deflating.

George was holding his arm which was red with blood. "I'm okay," he told them. "I'm all right."

And compared to Soltz, he surely was.

The creature's claws had slit open his face and shoulders and belly. He was bleeding profusely. He had severe burns on his face from its tongue. And his left eye that had gotten licked . . . it was just blood-red and swollen like a golf ball, oozing a bile of yellow tears.

And all that was bad enough, but as they went to him he began to have a seizure.

8

It was Fabrini's idea really, but Cook went along with it. Crycek told them they were inviting death and Menhaus said it would be like living in a coffin. Saks thought it was amusing, told them if they cut him lose he'd even let Fabrini have his sister.

So the five of them boarded the *Cyclops,* made their way to the aft deckhouse and the cabins below. Crew's quarters, is what Saks told them. Simple, spartan, efficient. They chose two of the cabins and began cleaning them out, which was a matter of dusting them and opening portholes to get some air in. The bunk mattresses and bolsters were mildewed and patched with rot and they dragged them out and dumped them in the corridor. After a time, the cabins weren't exactly the Holiday Inn, but they were livable.

What neither Cook nor Fabrini especially cared for was turning Saks loose, but sooner or later, they would have had to anyway.

"I'll even do you a favor," Saks told them. He motioned with his thumb to Crycek. "I'll bunk with the nut, so you two girls can spend some quality time sucking tongue."

Fabrini just glared at him. "We starting that shit again, Saks?"

And Saks just grinned. Broad, full, filled with secret delight. And you could just see what was in his eyes, what was bouncing through his head: unfinished business. There was unfinished business between Fabrini and him. And when it came time to dance again, it wouldn't be in the confines of a lifeboat.

Menhaus, some color back in his cheeks now that they were out of the water, said, "I'll be bunking in with them. There won't be any trouble." There was almost something fierce beneath his words. "There better not be any trouble."

Saks thought that was funny. "Not from me, not from me. You might want to keep an eye on Crycek, though."

"Oh," Cook said, "Crycek's got his feet under him now, I think."

"More or less," Crycek said.

All in all, none of them liked that somehow pernicious atmosphere of the ship, but they all agreed on one thing: it beat the shit out of the lifeboat. At least they could move here. At least they could stretch their legs and get out of one another's hair. And if something came after them, at least there was room to fight and evade. And the way they were looking at things, that was definitely something.

Later, once they had a snack of crackers and cheese washed down with tepid water and Cook had given them their glucose tablets like the survival manual said, Fabrini and Cook sat in their cabin and chatted. Even with the porthole open, the air was still dank and clammy. Not necessarily chilly, just heavy and moist and stale.

"I don't want the others knowing about that log book," Cook said, knowing that Saks was up on deck and Crycek was out foraging for *things* . . . what those *things* were, he would not stay. "It won't do them any good."

Fabrini chuckled. "You think any of that would bother Saks? Not on your life. Boarding a fucking ghost ship wouldn't bother him . . . long as he was free to plot and scheme."

"Which he's probably doing right now."

Neither of them doubted that. You could count on certain things in life and Saks

being a low-down, underhanded weasel was one of them. But was he really a danger? That was something they could not decide. Even with the shit he'd put them through on the raft — he claimed it was a temporary madness, a hysteria that had run its course — they could not be sure. Fabrini didn't like it, but Cook explained to him that Saks probably wouldn't harm them. That he knew one thing about Saks now and he knew it well: Saks was deeply afraid of being alone.

Cook said, "Crycek seems like he's starting to get a grip on things, I don't want to upset him with any of that shit in the log. Maybe it's all a load of bullshit, but somehow I doubt it."

Fabrini just nodded. "What do you think about it, though? About all that shit Forbes wrote in there . . . do you think it's all really true?"

"Yes," Cook said, "I do."

Given that Cook was pretty much in charge now — something he still was not real crazy about — he wondered if such an admission was a good idea. Surely, the leadership manual would have advised against it. When you were the man in charge, you had to consider morale. But there was absolutely no way Cook could lie about any of it. And particularly not to Fabrini who had read the log and had been there when Cook had been touched by the long-dead mind of Forbes . . . or whatever that had been. Impression, reflection, call it what you will.

"So where does it leave us?" Fabrini said pretty calmly.

"Hell if I know." Cook sat on his bunk, staring at his knees. "I guess we just have to accept that we're lost in some terrible place and that there's terrible things here."

Oh boy, how was that for building morale?

"I was thinking about what Forbes said about that other ship out there," Fabrini said. "And I'm thinking there's got to be lots more. I mean, you've heard all that Devil's Triangle shit same as me. If half of it's true, this place has to be like a fucking junkyard of lost ships."

"And planes."

"Exactly. Maybe after we sort ourselves out a day or two, we ought to think about doing a little exploring a little further out. Never know what we might find"

No, Cook was thinking, you just never know what you might find. Or what might find you.

But Fabrini definitely had a valid point. The *Cyclops* was just one of hundreds if not thousands. Ships and planes had been getting funneled into this dead zone for as long as there had been ships and planes. And, no doubt, the *Mara Corday* was not going to be the last. Out there, just maybe, there would be other ships and boats and maybe even if they didn't have people on them, they would probably have food and water, maybe motorboats and gasoline, weapons, you name it.

"Yeah, I like the way you think, Fabrini," Cook told him. "If there's other ships out there, we might just find some supplies and make a go of this."

And not only did he like Fabrini's sudden pioneer resourcefulness, but he liked his sudden positive turn of mind. He'd been scared before, Cook knew. Bad scared . . . and who hadn't and who still wasn't? But he had emerged from that with a refreshing can-do sort of spirit. And that was good. Because in this place, Cook decided, your mind could destroy you just as quick as what waited out in the fog.

Fabrini waited a moment, then said, “Why don’t you just tell me what’s on your mind, Cook. I mean, shit, it would take a lot to rain on my parade now being that it’s already fucking sunk.”

“Who said there’s anything on my mind?”

“Nobody had to.”

Cook nodded. “All right. All this is bad enough, sure, but now here’s a little icing on the cake.” He got up and walked over to the porthole, surveying the mist and weeds. “You read what Forbes said. About that white jelly being inside those dead men and how they’d found globs of it other places . . . what did he say? It had a funny *shine* to it? That the doctor had burned his hands touching it? That the burns on those corpses looked like radium burns? You see what I’m getting at here?”

But Fabrini just shook his head. “Cook, I dropped out in the tenth grade. Spell it out for me.”

Cook smiled, but not for long. “Radiation,” he said.

“Shit.”

“Yeah, those burns and all the crew getting sick after they came off the *Korsund* . . . it sounds like radiation exposure, doesn’t it? Radiation sickness. Forbes wouldn’t have known about radiation back in 1918 and that Dr. Asper probably only knew a little, but it sure fits the bill, doesn’t it?”

Fabrini looked pale. “That *thing* Forbes talked about . . . he thought it got the crew on the *Korsund* and his own crew on this tub . . . shit, do you think this ship is still full of it? For all we know, we might already glow in the dark.”

“If we’ve been exposed, it’s probably too late,” Cook told him. “We’re probably saturated . . . but remember now, I’m just guessing here. That’s all. Besides, not all radiation stays active for a long time like when they drop a bomb. I read once where the majority of radioactive materials have a half-life — disintegration rate — of days or weeks, something like that. So I’m guessing that after almost ninety years, we’re probably safe.”

“Until it comes again.”

“Yes,” Cook said.

He knew he was reaching with a lot of this. But it sure sounded like whatever that thing was, radioactivity was part of its natural properties much like exhaling carbon dioxide was part of man’s. And maybe it wasn’t radiation as they understood it, but it was something damn close.

“If it’s gonna come for us,” Fabrini said, “I just wish it would already and fry our brains. Get it done with.”

“If it’s still even here,” Cook said.

Fabrini just shook his head. “Oh, it’s here, all right. Crycek might be crazy . . . but it don’t mean he’s wrong.”

9

They did what they could for Soltz, which wasn't much.

Gosling, who had a pretty good working knowledge of first aid, bandaged his wounds and stopped the bleeding. Gave him some pain killers and washed out his eye with sterile solution, put a bandage over it. But that was about it. That was all they could do under the circumstances. They covered him with one of the waterproof blankets and pretty much hoped for the best.

"He isn't going to make it, is he?" Cushing said.

Gosling just shrugged. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Soltz had lapsed into something like a coma now. He moaned from time to time and shivered violently. He was feverish and sweating, a sweet unpleasant smell coming off him that reminded Cook of burnt hot dogs.

George was watching the bat-thing.

It was dead now.

Just drifting through the weed same as they were. He wasn't sure what had killed it. Not really. Only that it had died maybe twenty or thirty minutes after it had fallen into the water. The only damage they had done it was smashing up its antennae. Would that have been enough? Could it have died from damaged sensory apparatus? George didn't think so. Cushing was of the mind that it had asphyxiated, that it had been a water breather and it had just been out of the water too damn long. Simple, pat. But it did not explain why the thing had those streamers of yellow pulp floating from its mouth like it vomited out its own intestines.

George was thinking change in pressure.

Like one of those deep-sea fish brought up in a trawl net, the kind that sort of explode from the loss of pressure.

"I don't know," Cushing said. "That bastard seemed pretty lively to me, George. Abyssal creatures tend to be pretty sluggish when they come up, if they're alive at all."

Point. The bat-thing had been hovering for some time behind the raft. If it was suffocating, why hadn't it just dived back in? Curiosity? It didn't understand what the raft and the pink creatures in it were so it had to find out even at the cost of its own life? No, that was silly. Animals could be curious, but only to a point.

Maybe it was sick, George got himself to thinking as he prodded its carcass with the oar, *maybe that's what it was about.*

But then looking over at Soltz, he figured it out.

Or thought he did.

Soltz was either dying or close to it. Gosling said his cuts were severe, but not life-threatening . . . yet he was feverish and shaking, seemed to be in some sort of a coma. Like the guy had contracted some weird tropical disease or was full of infection. And maybe, just maybe, it was both. The bat-thing's saliva had burned him, gotten into his cuts . . . and who knew what kind of parasites and germs it carried? Things deadly to human biology perhaps, alien things our immune system couldn't hope to fight against. So, if that was true, maybe the same was true in reverse: the biology of that thing was killing Soltz, but maybe *his* biology had killed it off first.

He told Cushing this and Cushing liked it. “Makes sense, George. You’ve got a logical, scientific turn to your mind and you never even knew it.”

“Yeah, that’s great, but if he’s infected with something . . . we could all be in danger.”

“Does that worry you?” Gosling asked.

“Yes.”

He nodded. “And what are our alternatives?”

George knew what they were. “We don’t have any.”

And they didn’t. Living in a raft at close quarters pretty much ruled out the possibility of quarantine and there were no emergency rooms handy. Soltz was one of them. Infected or not, they had to care for him even if it meant getting sick themselves. They could not abandon him . . . if they did that, they were no better than, well, *Saks* for example.

“You’re right, we don’t have any. So?”

George just shrugged. “So I suppose there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Figured you’d say that.”

Good old Gosling. The supreme pragmatist. You could always count on him to see the practical side of just about anything.

Gosling had repaired the tears in the gunwale of the raft using the repair kit and had aired it back up using the hand-pump. They had taken some water, but not enough to be alarmed about. The inflated arches were pretty much toast, though. The creature’s barbed tail spines had literally shredded them and that was that.

George was starting to drift off when he realized that there was something in front of the raft. Another shadow, though this one was larger than the devil ray beast. Much larger. Whatever it was, it had to be easily twenty-feet across and seemed to be getting larger by the moment.

Maybe it was a submerged bank of weed, maybe something else.

He was about to draw Gosling’s attention to it when Soltz came out of his fugue, started babbling about the rusted chain on his bicycle in-between ragged breaths of air. Gosling went to him with Cushing at his side. Cushing mopped sweat from his brow and Gosling checked his vitals.

“How is he?” George asked, to which Gosling just shook his head.

And that pretty much said it all.

Soltz was fading and there wasn’t a damn thing they could do about it. Just sit there and twiddle their thumbs and watch him die. And the idea of that just about sucked the lot of them dry.

That shadow was closer now. Easily within ten feet of the raft. Whatever it was, either they were drifting toward it or it was drifting toward them. Take your pick.

“You see it?” George said, knowing Cushing had.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah.”

Gosling had seen it, too, but was preoccupied with trying to make Soltz comfortable. Maybe he had, for Soltz had gone back to his dream-island again which was about all you could hope for under the circumstances. If he had to die, it would be better if he went in his sleep.

Even with the semi-brightening of the day and the use of a flashlight, you could

only see maybe five or six inches down into the sea. Light would penetrate no farther. That shadow, George figured, was about that far down, maybe less. Just visible as a shape, but no more.

"I don't like it," Cushing said.

Gosling was watching it. "Row around it then."

There's a mad dog in your path, just walk around it.

He was being Mr. Realism again, of course, but it was obvious that he did not like that big dark mass being on a slow collision course with them either. But he could not come right out and say it. It was not his way. He was used to being in charge of men and that had not left him. Even in this godforsaken place. And when you were in charge, you didn't admit to trouble very easily.

George was thinking: *I don't know what in the Christ you are, Mr. Shadow, but you're giving me a real funny feeling in my belly and I don't like it one fucking bit. Just go away now, go away. Leave us be. We don't need another flying manta ray from Mars . . .*

And wasn't that a cheerful thought? That the dead bat-thing might have a big brother or a pissed-off father?

"Here," Cushing said, putting an oar in his hands. "Let's get away from it."

George had his oar on the port side and Cushing had his starboard. Feeling something evaporating in their throats and the patter of their hearts begin to pick up, they began to paddle madly away from the mass. Neither thought they would, but then, when it was maybe five feet from the raft, they broke away and to the right and skirted it, came around it into open water.

There.

Simple.

It was behind them now. Just a huge, spreading shadow. In five, ten minutes, it would be out of sight, another nasty little secret tucked away in the fog.

"Probably wasn't anything to begin with," Cushing said, almost like he was trying to convince himself of the fact. "Nothing alive. Just something drifting around . . . some junk."

And George wanted badly to disagree with that, because he didn't think that mass was just some harmless patch of submerged weed or clot of muck. It had approached the raft because it *wanted* to approach the raft.

"Wait a minute now," Gosling said. "It's coming back . . . maybe it's caught in the line from the sea anchor."

Sure, George thought, maybe.

It sounded good, sounded damn reasonable . . . but he didn't believe it. Whatever was out there it was indeed coming back. Not like something snared on the anchor, but like something moving under its own power.

"Shit," Cushing said, which summed it up nicely.

The mass was coming back and coming back fast. It was still down deep enough in that foul water where they could not see what it was and maybe it wanted things that way.

Gosling had an oar now, too. "Row for chrissake," he told them. "Row your asses off."

And they did, splashing through the water, sliding over patches of weed and cutting across those occasional channels of open, dark water. They were moving, but it was still gaining. Coming even faster now and George thought he saw it moving with an odd pulsating sort of motion.

"It's gonna hit us," Gosling said. "Get into the center of the raft."

They pulled in their oars and did just that.

Still the thing came, not slowing at all. It was going to bump them any minute now. Ten feet, then five, then right on top of them, everyone tensing and gritting their teeth and waiting for it . . . but it never hit them. Inches from the raft it simply disappeared.

"It went under us," Gosling said.

And that surely wasn't good. Because it was bad enough to be dogged in that Dead Sea by some black mass, but at least then you knew where it was. Not knowing, now that was far worse any way you sliced it.

"Where is it?" Cushing asked, trying to look in every direction at the same time.

"Gone," Gosling said.

And George sat there, the seconds ticking away like separate eternities as he waited for something else to happen. For some nameless horror, perhaps, to rise up from the stark depths and engulf the entire raft like a clam closing its shell.

Up ahead, maybe twenty feet in front of the raft, bubbles broke the surface. Dozens of them until it looked like a submarine was about to surface. But what surfaced was that black mass again. It came nearly to the surface, then dipped back down again like it was saying, *yeah, I'm here all right, but you don't get to know what I am. Not until I decide . . .*

"It's just sitting there," Cushing said. "I don't like this at all . . . fucking thing is giving me the creeps. Don't mind saying so either."

Gosling smiled thinly and maybe George did, too. But you could see that Cushing did not care one iota. That mass was scaring him just as it was scaring them, but at least he had the balls to admit as such out loud.

So they waited.

The thing waited.

"Haven't we had enough already?" George said out loud and was immediately sorry that he had. The others were thinking it, sure, but he'd been the one to say it. Something that certainly didn't need saying.

He kept his mouth shut.

After maybe ten minutes of awful *nothing,* the mass began to move slowly toward the raft. It was in no hurry. It had all the time in the world and seemed to know it.

"I think it's . . . I think it's coming up," Gosling said.

It was.

Something was. Something was emerging, breaking the surface in a foam of bubbles and slime, something like an immense umbrella-shaped dome that ran from a lustrous purple at its apex to a fleshy bubblegum-pink around its edges. Thing was, it did not stop coming up. More of it was visible all the time, a hideous collection of floats and polyps and wheezing bladders, white and red and orange and emerald. All glistening and shining and fluttering. Around the outside of the dome, there were a series of dark oily

nodules that might have been eyes . . . hundreds of them, black and jellied and staring.

"It's a . . . a jellyfish," Cushing said and you could hear it just beneath his words, that peculiar combination of wonder and terror and revulsion they were all feeling.

A jellyfish.

But the kind of jellyfish that swam the Dead Sea. Its bell was maybe thirty feet across, all those hissing bladders and floats that surrounded it as big as basketballs. They were inflating and deflating, like the thing was breathing. The water was roiling now with hundreds of pale yellow tentacles that fanned out in every direction. Some were wire thin, others thicker than a man's arm and veined with a ruby-red networking that might have been arteries . . . or nerve ganglia for all anyone could say. Some of those tentacles must have been hundreds of feet in length.

"Jesus Christ," Gosling said.

And George wanted to say something, too, but he was positively breathless. His lungs were filled with dust devils and blowing sand and that was probably a good thing . . . for if his voice had come, managed to push past his lips which were melted together in a gray line, it would have been a scream. The mother of all screams. For what was bouncing through him at the sight of this monstrosity, this evil living hot-air balloon and its attendant floats, was sheer, unbridled terror. Raw and stark and mad.

It could not be.

This thing could not be.

The water was a seething, undulating forest of its tentacles now and they had completely encircled the raft like coils of cable. They were underwater in thick, roping clusters and breaking the surface in tangles so thick you could have walked across them.

As far as George could see . . . tentacles. A writhing, heaving mass of them, congested like vines in the jungle.

When he found his voice, gagging on the heady vinegar-like stench of the thing, all he could say was, "What the fuck? What the fuck now?"

But nobody answered him.

Cushing and Gosling sat stock still, maybe afraid that if they moved that gargantuan alien jellyfish would sense it, would know exactly where they were and envelop them in a dripping sweep of tentacles. George decided he was going to follow their example and lock down his muscles, even though every muscle and nerve-fiber in him was snapping like high-tension lines.

So they sat and waited and the fog swirled and coalesced, was born in luminous plumes and sparkling shrouds, died in its own arms and was reborn again. Steam misted from the weeds and marshy water. And the raft waited silently with three ice sculptures onboard, an immense nightmare medusan ringing them in like a nickel tangled in a bed of kelp.

What finally broke that leaden, weighty silence was Soltz.

He moaned, groaned, made a wet gasping sound. His lips parted with a dry smacking. His face was beaded with perspiration and his unbandaged eye looked glazed and milky. "Water," he was saying. "I need . . . water . . . need water . . . a drink of . . . water . . ."

And George, even though he knew the man was sick, wanted desperately to stuff a rag in his mouth, tell him to shut the hell up. Because that repeated, dull cadence of his

voice was stirring up the jellyfish. Its tentacles were vibrating as if they were hearing it. Around the rim of its bell there was a fan of colorless cilia that looked like waterlogged spaghetti. They had been hanging limp before, barely moving with a sort of drifting motion like sea grass, but now they were twitching and trembling. Maybe the jellyfish couldn't hear, but maybe it could sense the vibration caused by sound.

Cushing moved and a half dozen tentacles jerked as if in surprise.

"Sit fucking still," Gosling said in a whisper. "It knows we're here, just not exactly where . . ."

Soltz began to stir. He shifted and shook, the waterproof blanket sliding down to his knees. He was up in what passed for the bow and the thing's tentacles were mere inches away from him over the lip of the raft.

His motion made those tentacles flutter. They changed from the color of wheat to a bright, neon-yellow. Most of them just lay motionless in the water, but a dozen or so above the waterline began to coil in lazy rolls like pythons. It wasn't just the tentacles that changed color, but the bell, too. It looked oddly synthetic, George had thought upon first seeing it, like something poured from a Jello mold. A perfectly circular mass of transparent jelly that looked deep enough to drown in, skinned with a rubbery membrane like cellophane wetted down with cooking spray. And now it was changing color, too. From that rich purple to hot pink and then scarlet and orange and indigo . . . it looked like gasoline on water.

"Why the hell is it doing that?" George said under his breath.

"Chromatophores," Cushing said just as quietly. "Pigmentation cells . . . it can either control its pigment or it's reacting to mood swings like a squid . . ."

But George wasn't sure if he was buying that.

What he was thinking was insane . . . but what if it was responding to their voices? The subtle vibrations they caused? Only when they spoke did the bell effuse color. What if it was . . . Jesus . . . *intelligent* and it was trying to communicate?

That was scarier than just about anything he could imagine. The idea of some revolting dumb predator was infinitely preferable to one that could reason. For if it could reason, then it was only a matter of time before it figured out how to get them out of the raft.

This was bad. George had thought it had all been bad up to this point . . . the giant eel attacking the raft, that crazy devil-ray bat . . . but none of that had been like this. It was one thing to be able to fight back, regardless of how disgusting your adversary was, but to just sit here and wait and wonder helplessly while your mind turned upon itself like a top, showing you all the unpleasant details of your death . . . yeah, now that was *really* bad. The sort of bad that reached down inside you and yanked your guts out through your mouth until there wasn't a goddamn thing left in you but an echoing void like the hollow of an empty drum.

Somebody better do something, George thought, *or I'm gonna crack, see if I don't.*

And maybe he was close, maybe they were all close, but he held it in check best he could. He felt gutless and sick and scared. Very scared. For how could you not be? Waiting there like that in the foggy silence, feeling like a condemned man waiting for execution, everything inside you tense and bunched, ready to explode. And in the back of

your mind there was that primitive urge to fight, to do battle, even though the idea was ludicrous. There was no chance of victory against something of this *immensity* . . . yet, that primal man inside said it was better to die that way, fighting and slashing and cutting with blood in your mouth, than to take it like this. Just sitting there, letting it happen. And George figured that made real good sense, for maybe the jellyfish would kill them quicker that way. Maybe the very defiance of them hacking at its tentacles would piss it off. And a quick death would be better than waiting, better than feeling your mind going to a cold slop as those tentacles embraced you like living ropes.

George didn't honestly think he could handle being touched by it. That was just unthinkable. Repellent. Like being webbed up by a spider and feeling it lick you . . . your mind would go to sauce.

The tentacles continued to unwind, slithering over and around each other like a tangle of nesting snakes slowly waking.

The minutes ticked by.

George could hear those tentacles now brushing up against the sides of the raft with a squeaking sound. Many of them, questing and scraping and investigating. One of them rose up, hovered directly over Soltz's head and everyone on the raft held their breath . . . it passed within two, three inches of his face, found the gunwale of the raft and tapped against it, withdrew.

But that was hardly the end of it.

Those tentacles were real busy all of a sudden. It seemed as if maybe the jelly was intelligent to a certain degree, for it kept touching the raft, trying to figure it out. One of the tentacles slid up the side of the raft and wormed its way inside, just touching things . . . the blanket that covered Soltz's legs, an oar, the zippered compartments that contained the survival equipment. It found a lightstick and darted back as if it did not like the feel of it. Then it slid back over the side. Four or five others began tapping their way along the gunnel as if looking for something.

One of them got real close to George.

It was the pale, waxy yellow of a gourd. An undulant and rubbery thing like a great blind worm rooting through mulch. Not aggressive, merely explorative. It brushed over the tip of George's boot, paid it no mind.

And George, feeling hot and loose inside, thought, *what the hell does it want? What is it looking for?*

Other tentacles passed very close to Gosling and Cushing. Cushing had to move his arm out of their way.

There were things about this creature that Cushing wanted to tell them about. He knew jellies, had done a great deal of reading about them, and this was not exactly a jelly. A jellyfish, he wanted to tell them, was a hydrozoan, a colonial animal, a colony of specialized cells. Jellies did not act like this. They were not capable of reaching around and grasping things with their tentacles. He also wanted to tell them that if this was indeed a jellyfish, then those tentacles would be lined with stinging cells.

The only good thing, everyone noticed, was that the sort of tentacles that were doing the exploring were not terribly numerous. From what they could see in the water, the thing had no more than a few dozen of them. Which seemed like a lot until you realized that the jelly had hundreds of tentacles. But most were thin, reedy projections

that fluttered in the water like long wisps of yellow hair.

It might have went on that way for hours or even days or at least until that medusan grew bored or dried out and had to dive back down to rehydrate itself. That was, if it hadn't been for Soltz. Soltz awakening in a kind of delirium, sitting up and moaning, licking his lips and breathing hard. His one good eye looking around, but dreamy and unfocused, confused. He tossed the blanket aside and right away those big tentacles started moving around, coiling and corkscrewing.

"What?" he said, barely able to catch his breath. "What is this? What . . . what . . . what?"

The sound of his voice triggered chemical changes in the bell of the jellyfish. It went from that livid purple to a soft yellow, then the bright orange and fiery red of a sunset.

"Soltz . . ." Gosling whispered, but it was no good.

Two of the tentacles came up the side of the raft like snakes. Soltz did not see them. He tossed his blanket aside and it struck them, making them twist like earthworms in direct sunlight.

"Colors," Soltz said, "look at those awful colors . . ."

So maybe he did see the jelly. For even the tentacles were suffused with oranges and reds now. The floats and bladders around the bell were inflating and deflating rapidly, the bell was quivering. Three or four more tentacles boarded the raft, looping and creeping. Soltz grabbed an oar and swung at them. They would never have been strong enough to drag a man overboard, for as the oar hit one that was rising up like a rattlesnake in a defensive posture, it went to pulp. It literally shattered in a spray of jelly. The bell went bright red and a dozen tentacles went after Soltz. He hit some with the oar and they exploded, but he wasn't fast enough.

Two or three others noosed around him and he instantly dropped the oar, screaming and thrashing as the nematocysts of the tentacles, the stinging cells, injected their toxins into him. He stood right up straight as a post and a dozen more ringed him, and he fell thrashing into the water, right into the squirming forest of the thing.

Cushing cried out and Gosling held him back.

There was no helping Soltz.

Not now.

"Do something for chrissake!" George cried out. "We can't just let him-"

"We don't have a fucking choice," Gosling said, just sick with it all. "Nothing to be done . . . just, just don't look."

But George *was* looking. There was no way he could not. Like seeing a man fall beneath a subway train, you simply had to look. Because maybe, just maybe, what you saw wouldn't be as bad as what your mind would show you if you didn't look.

Soltz was pretty much out of his head when he attacked those tentacles. To him it was a dream and he'd been reacting with dreamlike logic. When the tentacles touched him, he felt an instant searing agony spread over his bare arms and face. It was like being stuck with glowing red needles. A stinging, burning sensation that brought tears to his eyes and a scream to his mouth.

And then he was in the water, thrashing in a sea with something like kelp and crawling weed, only that weed was on fire and him with it. He was flailing in that mass of

tentacles, covered with them. They were draped over his face and tangled around his arms. Many of them had come apart and hung over him in rags and glistening membranes. The bell was a livid, boiling red, pulsing and shuddering, and Soltz was screaming through a mouthful of jellied polyp as those stinging nettles shot barbs of neurotoxin into him.

Somebody was calling out to him, but the voice seemed to be coming from some distant gulf. It was muffled and unreal. He tried to thrash away, but it was no good. He was knotted in jellyfish. Huge, tortuous waves of convulsive pain tore through his legs, his belly, and now his hands and arms as he clawed and fought, trying to free himself.

"Ah, ahhhh!" he gasped as water filled his mouth. "Help me! *Help meeeee!"*

He tore at floats and bladders, scratching rents in the bell itself.

He kicked and splashed and ripped at the trailing toxic whips and became further ensnared, his entire body lacerated with blinding agony that made his head buzz with white noise.

He could hear voices shouting, yelling, screaming.

But it was hard to understand above his own shrieks that seemed to be fading now, echoing from an empty room. The pain was unreal and encompassing. It blotted out everything. It was like some impossible Oh-my-God wall of torture rising up around him and he seemed to be sinking down further, embraced by tentacles, his mouth filled with a stinging pulp that bloated his tongue in his mouth.

Then he was sinking, sucking in water and slowly, very slowly, everything was going gray. He could see nothing but tentacles and jelly, ruptured bits of the thing drifting everywhere in the cascading bubbles. And then everything was quiet. Still. No sound. No motion. Just that peaceful womblike grayness swallowing up all and everything

He felt himself sinking deeper.

Felt himself break the surface once again and then submerge for good.

Then nothing.

The men in the raft saw it all, watched it with stunned abject horror. George saw Soltz break the surface that last time, the bandage gone from his bad eye that was red and shining and filled with blood. That eye seemed to see him in the raft, it locked onto him and then sank beneath the foaming, dirty sea like a dying sun.

And that was the last they saw of Soltz.

10

When Saks came back, Fabrini was sleeping in his bunk. But Cook was awake. Wide awake, just sitting there and maybe trying to sort it all out in his mind which was no easy thing. Saks came through the door, his piggish face streaked with grime like he'd been crawling around down in a mechanic's bay.

"Crycek back?" Cook asked.

Saks shook his head. "Haven't seen him.

Menhaus went looking for him."

"I suppose he'll find him."

Cook was waiting for the typical response from Saks, some homosexual innuendo, but he got none. Nothing about his mother entertaining football teams or his father fucking barnyard swine. None of the usual. Saks just stood there silently, a funny look in his eyes.

"You find anything?" Cook asked him.

"Not much. That fungus is everywhere. Found some skeletons below, but whoever owned 'em died a long time ago."

Saks said he found the galley, too. The cutlery was all tarnished, but usable. The food was long ago rotted away. Sacks of flour and sugar were full of fungus. Same went for casks of water and bread. But he did find several sealed containers of salt pork.

"You think it's all right?" Cook asked him.

"Looks like it might be," Saks said. "But I don't know if I'd want to put any of it in my mouth."

"Anything else?"

"Rats."

"Rats?"

Saks nodded. "I didn't see them . . . but I could hear them in the bulkheads. They were scratching."

After that, Saks went back to his cabin, that funny look still in his eyes and Cook knew something was up. Either he had seen something or did something or was thinking about doing something. Regardless, Cook didn't really care.

When Saks was gone, he locked the cabin door and curled up on his bunk on a mattress he'd found that wasn't too mildewed. He covered himself with a waterproof blanket from the lifeboat and fell asleep almost instantly, thinking of scratching in the walls and rats. He dreamed of ghosts.

11

Thirty minues after Soltz went down, nobody on the raft had spoken. Maybe it was that they couldn't speak in the aftermath of what they had seen and maybe it was that they were afraid of what they might say. Who they would say it to. Who they would blame. So maybe silence was best.

The jellyfish had disappeared with Soltz, but now it was back.

It wasn't as close to the raft now, but just up ahead drifting with them. Its bell was nearly submerged, but now and again it would come up, then sink back down again. But even at that distance — maybe a hundred feet, right about where the fog swallowed everything — its tentacles were everywhere in the water. A fluttering skein of them that reached out, circling the boat and winding beneath it, trailing in the stillborn current like a mane. So, essentially, they were trapped.

And the idea of that was almost as painful as watching Soltz die in the caress of some sea monster.

Almost.

"So what now?" George heard himself say aloud, realizing he'd only meant to think that as he'd been thinking it for days now.

Gosling looked over towards the jelly, squinted his eyes. It looked pretty much like a gigantic plastic garbage bag, deflated and wrinkly up there, not smooth and taut as before. George's voice had no effect on either it or its tentacles.

"Yeah," Cushing said. "What now?"

"We wait," Gosling told them.

"I'm sick of goddamn waiting, Gosling, I can't take much more of it," George said, knowing that finally, ultimately the Dead Sea was pushing him over the edge. He could feel his mind unwinding in his head like string from a spool. "I mean, I can't take much more of this. Why don't you put a flare into that motherfucker? See if it can feel some pain."

"Piss it off?"

"Why not?"

"Why not? You didn't see what that sonofabitch did to Soltz when he pissed it off? You want I should burn a hole in it, get it nice and mad? Okay, I'm game. Just tell me what we're going to do when it comes at us, attacks the raft? Just tell me that, bright boy."

George felt his cheeks redden. "So you want to sit here like fucking cowards and wait for that prick to choose the moment we die?"

"Shut up, you goddamn idiot," Gosling snapped at him.

"Listen, you two," Cushing said. "This won't accomplish anything."

"Shut the hell up," George told him. "Our master and fucking commander over here wants us to sit and wait until that goddamn sea monster gets hungry again. Well, I'm not about to wait. If we got to die, then let's die like men already. Let's give that bastard a taste."

Gosling just shook his head. "C'mon, George, don't be so damn stupid. No sense riling it up. I mean look at it out there, it looks dead for chrissake. Maybe Soltz wounded

it."

"Yeah, and maybe it's just biding its time, waiting for the right moment to spring on us."

"Don't give it that much credit, George. It's a fucking jellyfish. You act like it's the town bully. It's just an animal, a creature, it doesn't think or plot. It's a lower form of life . . . it reacts, right, Cushing?"

Cushing nodded. "That's it. It just reacts to stimuli. I can't imagine it being intelligent, even as smart as a mouse."

George knew he was being ridiculous, had suddenly transformed into the weak link in the chain, but he wasn't backing down. Not now. "How the hell would you know, Cushing? I mean, really, how could you possibly know? This isn't the sort of jellyfish from back home. Its evolution was probably completely different. Maybe it does think. Maybe it can plot. What then?"

"Then we're probably fucked, George," Gosling said. "Any more questions?"

"Let's just take it easy now." Cushing was looking from one to the other. "Relax here. Giving a jelly intelligence is a real leap, George. I suppose it's possible, but not likely. For all we know, it may be damaged as Gosling says. It may not have any fight left in it . . . or life for that matter. Although, jellyfish are certainly not organized the way we are and damage to them and damage to us are two different things."

George sighed. They were right. Of course they were right. "Dammit . . . it's just that this waiting, it's getting under my skin."

"There's not much else we can do," Gosling said. "For all we know, it may just swim off."

But Cushing said, "I don't think so."

And pointed.

By then, they were all watching. Seeing that noxious jellyfish suddenly pump itself into life like a leaky beach ball filling with air. It rose up, that bell breaking the surface, wearing a crown of weeds. The floats and bladders it wore like some kind of pulsating necklace were coming up, too. A few fleshy and convoluting tentacles emerged, skimming over patches of weed.

If it was dead . . . it looked damn healthy.

The bell was round and tight and bloated-looking. From a distance, slicked in a scum of that filthy water, it looked like wet vinyl. Right away, as if it could hear them speaking, the bell lit with colors. First it went purple, like some especially moist and succulent plum, immediately fading to a sort of blushed violet and then magenta. But it didn't stop there. It went the deep, blood-red of port wine, then coral and the blinding neon yellow of wet chrome.

George watched those colors, amazed by them. Under any other circumstances, the jellyfish would have been a real marvel of nature. Something he might have paid to see at an aquarium. But now it was just deadly and deceptive and he wished some giant foot would come down and smash it the way things like that deserved to be smashed.

But those colors . . . George was certainly no invertebrate zoologist or physiologist and what he knew about the behavioral mechanics of lower species you could've kept in a thimble, yet he was certain that there was more to these colors than simple chemical reactions. He just couldn't get past the idea that this thing was somehow

trying to communicate with them in its own utterly alien way.

Could color variation be considered a language? It was ludicrous, of course, at least in the human frame of reference where languages had to be spoken, written, or even broken into mathematical symbols or telemetry . . . but what if? Was the idea really that absurd? Wasn't language essentially an organized, systematic grouping of sounds or letters or even images as in pictographic alphabets? The jelly was able to reproduce all the primary colors and literally hundreds, if not thousands, of variations in-between. Couldn't each separate color be considered a representation of thought much like separate configurations drawn on paper were?

George looked at it, really looked at the thing out there.

Although he had no idea what it was he was doing, he opened himself up to it. Let those colors come into him, let them fill him and, subconsciously almost, he began to equate different colors with different thoughts. The language of color. It was alien and insane . . . but why not? He watched those colors and felt like they were watching him, too. And as he received, he sent, he transcribed his own thoughts into brilliant swaths of radiant color: *Just go away, you have to go away. Maybe you honestly mean no harm and maybe you were only defending yourself against Soltz . . . but you're dangerous to us, to our kind. So just . . . please . . . go . . . away . . .*

"It's going under," Cushing said.

It sank beneath the sea taking its tentacles and floats with it. They could see it, just beneath the surface, a shifting and oily mass expanding and spreading out, pulsing. Then it began to move at the raft. Began to move fast.

"Shit," Gosling said.

They got into the center of the raft and that big, loathsome jelly came speeding through that turgid water, creating a slow and heaving wake in its path. But it never hit the raft. At the last moment, it ducked beneath and dove into the murk out of sight. The raft bobbed in the swell it left and then settled down.

Nobody moved for a time.

Maybe they were expecting it to attack from below, filling the raft with stinging tentacles, but it didn't. Five minutes, ten. It did not come back. The raft drifted along, butting its way through little islands of weed, skimming over the surface of that protoplasmic sea.

"I hope that sonofabitch stays gone," Cushing said.

To which Gosling replied. "Well, let's not sit here and wait for it to come back, let's do some rowing. It'll be good for us."

Cushing and Gosling took to the oars and the raft began to move deeper through the dark channels that snaked through the weed banks.

And George?

He just wondered if the jellyfish's departure was pure coincidence or the result of something much more impressive.

12

"No, we're all going," Cook told them. "All of us. We're going to explore this ship and we're going to do it together."

They were all standing in the corridor outside their cabins, smelling the stink of the ship and feeling its ominous weight settling down on them. Cook called them all out there and told them he wasn't crazy about any of them wondering around alone on the ship.

"All I'm saying is that this is an old hulk. A lot of the decks are rotten and one of you could fall through and the rest of us would never know about it," he explained to them, though rotting decks weren't what he was really concerned about. "So, if you've got to stretch your legs, just take someone with you."

Fabrini didn't have a problem with that and neither did Menhaus. Crycek just shrugged. But Saks, of course, smirked at the idea.

"You wanna be big boss man, Cook, it's okay with me," he said. "But you're not going to order me around."

"Jesus Christ, Saks," Fabrini said. "Just do what you're told."

"Who dropped a quarter into you, Fagbrini? I was talking to Cook, the big boss man. So kindly fuck off." He turned back to Cook. "I'll do what you say, if that's the way you want it. But if you think I'm some kind of prisoner, guess again."

Menhaus shook his head. "You starting again, Saks? We trusted you and untied you and you're starting again?"

"Zip it, fat boy," Saks told him. "I plan to do what I want. That's all there's to it. Besides, when I'm not around that gives you and Fabrini more time to suck tongue."

"Cocksucker," Fabrini said, coming at him now.

But he didn't get too close, because Saks stepped back and pulled out a knife. It had a seven-inch blade on it, looked sharp like he'd been working it on a stone. "Don't make me do something stupid, Fabrini, because I really don't want to."

Fabrini had his knife out then and the two of them faced each other, eyes filled with acid.

Menhaus looked pale.

Crycek just smiled, figuring it was inevitable.

Cook, figuring he was the only cool head, stepped between them. He had the Browning stuck in his belt, but he did not pull it. "Okay, you two, that's enough. Put those fucking blades away." He looked from Fabrini to Saks, his fingers drumming the butt of his gun. *I mean it.*

They saw that he did.

They backed off and the knives disappeared.

Cook said, "You know, we've got enough problems here, Saks, without your shit. You want to wander this goddamn wreck and kill yourself? Well, you go right ahead. No loss, I figure. But if you ever pull that knife on someone again, I swear to God I'll just put you down like a sick dog. And if you think I'm kidding, you think I'm bluffing, then you try pulling it on me right goddamn now."

Saks licked his lips and it was easy to see that he wanted to pull that knife.

Wanted to show these pukes what he was made of, but he backed down. And backing down did not come easy to a guy like Saks. It wasn't in his makeup. But he did and it filled him with poison. Poison that he secreted somewhere for later, when he had a chance to use it. But right then? No, not a good idea. Cook would kill him. He knew it. Cook was not bluffing.

"Okay," Saks said, "now that we know who's in charge, let's take a walk and see what there is to see."

Crycek was still smiling. "Yeah, nothing I love better than a ghost ship." He just shook his head. "What is it you expect to find?"

Menhaus said, "I don't know. People or something. Maybe."

Crycek laughed. "People? *People?* There's none left. Hasn't been for years and years. Something . . . something bad got these people. It slipped up from the darkness below and got them . . ."

"That'll do," Cook said.

Good old Crycek. He could make the Good Humor Man slit his fucking wrists. *Something . . . something bad got these people. It slipped up from the darkness below and got them* . . . Yeah, that was exactly what everyone needed to be hearing. Jesus.

"Let's get going," Fabrini said.

Saks had located a drum of kerosene, so they charged up a couple lanterns and went for a walk.

They found pretty much what they knew they'd find: lots of fungus and rust, some bones and debris. That was all they found thirty minutes into it, unless you wanted to count shadows or the distant sounds of scratching.

They let Saks lead them on, since he seemed to know his way around ships pretty well. But, as he reminded them again and again, he'd been in the Navy. He liked to remind them of all the places he'd been and all the things he'd done there. Cook didn't hate him as much as before. Sure, Saks still reminded him — frighteningly so — of his father, just another inveterate asshole, but he didn't want to kill him anymore. He almost felt sorry for the man. For all men like him who felt the need to hide their insecurities and fears behind a wall of machismo. And the realization of that came as something of a surprise to Cook. Somewhere along the way, he had changed. Hatred had become an odd species of pity. Now wasn't that something?

One of the first places they visited was the surgery.

It was dirty and cobwebbed, debris everywhere, fungus oozing down the walls like streamers at a kid's birthday party. The furniture and desk were pretty much rotten as was most of the woodwork in there. Cabinets held jars and bottles of drugs and chemicals, the liquids which had dried now to black goo and the powders solidified like cement. The labels on them were faded and unreadable. There were shelves of moldering books and a few yellowed medical degrees in dusty glass frames.

All in all, there was nothing but age here.

"You can almost feel the awful things that happened here," Crycek said.

"Ah, knock it off with that," Menhaus told him.

But he was right. As the others looted through cupboards of instruments and file cabinets of crumbling papers, Cook could actually feel it. Smell it. More than an odor of age and dissolution, but an odd trace memory of pain and blackness and lunacy. Things

had happened here, he was certain, terrible things that you didn't want to think about. It was here, he knew, that the men who'd been infected aboard the *Korsund* would have been taken. You could almost feel their slow, lingering deaths, the horror they felt as the *Cyclops* was locked tighter in the grip of something unknown and malevolent. They would have laid on those tables, vomiting their guts out, never knowing in their innocent minds what radiation poisoning truly was.

Yes, the pain was real here. You could feel it.

"Check this out," Fabrini said, hoisting a large wooden chest up onto a tabletop, pushing aside a dusty rack of test tubes and a box of slides. He knocked over a tall, antique brass microscope that was tarnished green. Motes of dust filled the lantern light.

Cook brushed sediment off it, waving dust away.

It was a surgeon's kit, he saw. Maybe the others didn't recognize what it was, but Cook had seen them before. When he wasn't pushing earth with a grader, he was something of a Civil War buff. He haunted reenactments and particularly the makeshift battlefield hospitals there. Most of the surgeon reenactors were medical men in real life and their equipment was contemporary to the 1860s.

"A doctor's kit," Cook told them. "A surgery kit."

Ebony-handled scalpels were pressed into felt compartments along with sutures, needles, probing hooks, tourniquets, and a particularly fearsome-looking post mortem knife. Cook lifted the tray of instruments out, revealing another beneath which held bone saws, artery clamps, bone snips, a large and rusty amputation saw. There were other implements he was not familiar with.

"Shit," Fabrini said, "makes my stomach weak just looking at that stuff."

There was a brass presentation plaque on the inside lid. It read: "Chas. W. Kolbe."

"That must have been the doctor," Menhaus said.

"No, his name was Asper," Fabrini said.

They all looked at him.

"How do you know that?" Saks put to him. "How do you know what his name was?"

Cook stepped in. "We saw it up on the bridge when we first came aboard. There's a crew list up there."

Which seemed to satisfy Menhaus and Crycek, but you could see Saks didn't believe it for a minute.

"Really?" he said. "A crew list? Isn't that something? Fabrini's got a good memory."

Cook led them out of there and back into the corridor.

They found the captain's quarters before long and although dusty and dirty, they had once been somewhat lavish. At least in comparison to the other cabins. There was nothing of note in there, save for some mildewed antiques — a naval campaign chest and a set of salon lamps. Fabrini found a nice scrimshaw-headed walking stick that he took with him. Overall, the captain's cabin was in worse shape that the others. There was a gaping hole in the bulkhead, fingers of mist seeping in.

"I wonder what caused that?" Menhaus said.

Saks was examining it. "Doesn't look like a shell punched through there. This room would be in shambles if it had. No . . . it almost looks *burned."*

Cook had trouble swallowing when he saw the hole and even more trouble when Saks said that. Yes, it probably was burned, he figured. Forbes had written about something coming through the bulkhead after Captain Worley.

"What could burn through iron that thick?" Menhaus wanted to know. "A torch? A goddamn laser beam?"

Crycek grinned at the idea.

"Any ideas, Fabrini?" Saks said.

Fabrini twisted a bit, but covered himself. "Who knows? So long ago, who could say?" Cook started breathing again. Goddamn Fabrini . . . how did he let the doctor's name slip?

Menhaus and Crycek were not interested in any of that, but Saks was. He knew he was on to something here. He had sensed some secret shared between Cook and Fabrini and he wasn't going to let go of it. Like a tongue working a sore tooth, he was going to keep at it. As they walked down the corridors, slopping through those mats of fungi, the lanterns creating wild and sinister shapes around them, he kept suggesting places they could investigate, digging and probing, trying to find out something that Cook and Fabrini did not want him to know about.

"I'd like to take a look at the engine room," he said, watching Fabrini for a sign of discomfort. "That sound good to you, Fabrini?"

Fabrini looked at Cook, looked away. "Don't matter to me."

"We were already down there," Cook said. "Nothing to see but a lot of rusty machinery."

"Old steam turbines, I bet," Saks said. "You wanna check 'em out, Menhaus?"

"Why not?"

There was no way to get out of it.

So down they went into that cavernous blackness, the lanterns peeling the darkness back layer by layer. They stood before the rusted, seized up turbines which were gigantic.

"Look at that piston," Menhaus said, in awe, as always, of mechanical things. "Bigger than a pillar . . . and solid fucking brass. Jesus."

There were a few inches of slimy gray water on the floor. They checked the machine shops and storerooms, found the pile of bones Cook and Fabrini had found . . . but the giant sea lice were gone. That was a good thing. Saks was trying to force a rusted hatch. With Menhaus' help, it came open with a terrible groaning that seemed to shake the ship. There was a companionway beyond it, a set of black iron steps.

"The bilge must be down here," Saks said. "Let's take a look."

There was no arguing with the guy. He felt that he was on to something and nobody could talk him out of it, even if he was light years away from the logbook that so disturbed Cook and Fabrini. Saks in the lead, they went down those creaking steps that were thick with slime and mold.

"Smells bad down here," Menhaus said. "You smell that?"

They all did. A black, filthy odor of decay and stagnance. A stench of moist, dripping subcellars, closets threaded with wood rot, caskets plucked from muddy graves. Things buried or that should have been buried. It was a stink similar to the rest of the ship, but down here the volume had definitely been turned up. It was actually warm and

yeasty, curiously alive with a sweet/sour tang of organic profusion like a hothouse filled with jungle orchids.

Not a good smell at all.

Cook had smelled something like that once before. When he was a boy, beneath his Uncle Bobby's trailer home. Bobby's old dog, Bobo, had disappeared the autumn before and come June, when the weather turned warm, they followed the stench under the trailer and found him. Down there amongst the cobwebs and spiders, mouse droppings and rotting cardboard boxes, old Bobo lay. He had sickened and crawled down there to die. Cook was the first to see him. He had literally rotted in half. A black fungus was growing out of his eye sockets and hindquarters, a slimy collection of toadstools sprouting from his belly. What Cook was smelling now reminded him of that — hot, moist germination.

The deck down there was flooded with about two feet of water. The hull was breached in half a dozen locations. Weeds had grown up through the holes and were threaded along the bulkheads. The bilge trough itself was thick with weeds and black, oozing water.

And that was bad.

"Jesus, lookit those holes," Menhaus said. "This goddamn wreck could sink at any moment."

But Cook said he didn't think it would. It was actually marooned in the weeds. They must have been thick beneath the ship beyond belief.

"Watch that trough," Saks told them, leading them on.

"What the hell do you expect to find down here?" Cook asked him.

But Saks didn't answer. He stepped lightly, over tangles of weed that were green and thick and thriving. Cook wanted them to turn back. What they were smelling, it was more than the stink of the weed. It was something else. A growing, noxious odor and he did not like it. From time to time he thought he heard a sort of secretive rustling from up ahead.

They passed around an arch of riveted steel and Saks stopped.

He brought his light up so they could all see. See that forest of white, pulsating things that grew up through an immense rent in the hull of the ship. They looked at first like the stems of some weird plant, but as Saks held the light up, they could see that they were wormlike, about as thick as fence posts and hollow. Hundreds of them, slithering and rustling, black mouths set at their ends.

"What the fuck?" Menhaus said.

"Worms," Cook told them, his skin crawling at the sight of them. "I think they're tube worms . . . like the kind you see around smoker vents on the ocean floor."

It was hard to say whether they were dangerous or not and nobody was getting close enough to find out, but they were certainly hideous. Squirming and horribly alive, standing straight up like saplings, mouths opening and closing like those of fish.

Cook almost felt like screaming at the sight of them.

In his mind, he saw himself lost without a light, stumbling around down here, falling into the bilge and dragging himself back up, all snarled with weeds and then . . . then falling into that creeping mass of tube worms. Feeling them coil around him, brushing his arms and face with their hot, rubbery corpse-flesh.

But it was only his imagination hurting him here. The worms appeared to be stationary and they couldn't get to him. But such thoughts, once born are not so easily dismissed. They exist in the dark spaces between rational thoughts, in the shadows of logic.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Saks said.

And then they were moving, trying not stumble over one another or fall into the bilge. Behind them, they could hear those worms moving and sliding against one another and by the time they got up the stairs to the engineroom, they had to stop themselves from running in blind panic.

No more was said about it.

As they made their way out of the engine room, they heard a sound. They all heard it.

Footsteps.

The sound of footsteps.

Someone was coming down the companionway ladder.

13

Everyone froze

Everyone just stood there.

Cook went for his gun, thinking that this had to be the very worst thing you could possibly hear on an old derelict: the sound of footsteps coming in your direction. He thanked God then and there than he was not alone. He wasn't sure he could have handled this alone.

The footsteps stopped outside the hatch. They could hear someone out there, someone breathing hard as if they'd run a long way. Of course, in everyone's mind, it was not that at all, it was something far worse. Some dead and dripping thing sheathed with fungus coming to pay them a call.

There was the sound of scraping as the latch was worked from the other side. That harsh breathing. The door opened a few inches and Saks, good old hardass Saks, pulled it open all the way and took hold of whoever-or whatever-was on the other side and pitched them or it to the floor with a quick, violent jerk of his hand.

It wasn't an *it.*

It was a *he.*

And whoever he was, the moment Saks pitched him to the deck, he let out a wild surprised cry and tried to find his feet. At which point, Saks kicked him in the side with enough force to knock the wind out of him.

"That's enough," Cook told him.

The face looking up at them in the yellow light of the kerosene lamp was round and streaked with dirt. Great, sunken half-moons were dredged beneath staring eyes. The lips were trembling. The face belonged to a chubby little man wearing jeans and a denim shirt so greasy and filthy, it looked like they'd been used to clean out a chimney.

"You . . . you're not supposed to be here," he said. "Not supposed to be on this ship . . . this is my ship . . . I'm supposed to be here, but not you . . ."

He was breathing hard with a rattling sound as if his lungs were clogged with phlegm.

"What's your name?" Cook asked him.

"I . . . my name," he said, examining his left hand like maybe it was written there. "I don't know . . ."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Fabrini said. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"He's crazier than a grub in shit," Saks said with his usual sensitivity.

The man kept babbling, not making a squirt of sense. Something about how they were not supposed to be there, that them being there was just wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Maybe he has amnesia like in one of them movies," Menhaus speculated.

But Cook found it hard to believe it was something so simple. Not here, not in this place. Whatever the reason was, he knew, it would be overblown and fantastic like everything else. What Cook was *really* wondering was: How long had this guy been aboard? Had he been here all the time, hiding from them or had he just arrived?

"Just tell us your name," Fabrini said. "How you got here."

But the guy just shook his head.

And Crycek, who'd been silent so far over the whole matter, said, "His name is Makowski, Bob Makowski. He was an oiler on the *Mara,* our ship. Guys called him 'Slim'''

Now all eyes were on Crycek.

"So why didn't you say so?" Saks said.

"I wasn't sure at first," Crycek explained. "It looked like him . . . but that don't mean nothing. Not here."

They ignored that.

"Help him up," Cook said.

Everyone stood there. Maybe they didn't like the idea of touching him, as if maybe he was a ghost that would go to mist in their fingers or whatever had driven him crazy might be catchy.

"Give him a hand, shit-fer-brains," Saks told Menhaus. "C'mon, Fabrini, get your hand out of your shorts. You heard the man."

Grudgingly, they helped Makowski to his feet. He couldn't stop staring at them as if he wasn't convinced of their reality anymore than they were convinced of his.

"It'll be okay, Slim," Menhaus told him. "We're all friends here."

Which got a laugh out of Saks.

They brought him up to the main deck and then down to their cabins. They sat him on Menhaus' bunk and tried to get something out of him. Which was about as easy as squeezing grape juice from a brick.

He just kept shaking his head as all those faces put questions to him.

He clutched his head in his hands, said, "I don't remember how I got aboard . . . I remember drifting . . . I must have drifted here. Do you think that's how it happened?"

Saks just shook his head. "Now he's asking us. What a fucking piece of work this one is. Crycek? You sure he ain't related to you?"

"You must remember something," Cook said to him. "Just relax and try to remember. The ship went down in the fog . . . do you remember that?"

Makowski's face twisted up like he'd bitten into a lemon. "The fog . . . oh the fog . . . there's voices in the fog . . . the voices . . . they told me things . . ."

Crycek had stepped back now, like maybe he'd smelled something on the guy he didn't like. Or maybe he thought Makowski's head was going to split open and a monster was going to jump out.

"He was probably hallucinating," Menhaus said.

But Makowski shook his head. "No, no, no . . . I *heard* them, they told me things, they said-" he sketched his index finger in the air like he was writing words "-they told me to come here . . . they showed me how to get here."

Saks shook his head. "This guy's a real fucking treasure."

"All right," Fabrini said. "Can you at least tell us how long you've been here?"

Makowski just looked at him dumbly like the question had been spoken in Aramaic or low Latin.

"Don't waste your time, Fabrini," Saks said. "This guy don't have no bristles on his broom."

"You know, you're not helping a thing here, Saks," Cook told him. "Let's just go

easy."

Saks laughed at the idea. Like maybe if he had his way, they'd throw Makowski's useless ass over the side.

They kept at it another twenty or thirty minutes until it became pointless . . . if it hadn't been before. Then they packed it in and decided to get some sleep. Saks's watch, a digital, was still working and he told them it was getting on around eleven p.m. back in the real world.

"I suppose this crazy squirt of shit gets to bunk with us, eh?" Saks said. "Why not? Me and Menhaus, we already have Crycek. Might as well make it a full set."

Cook sighed. "Well, I thought-"

"He ain't sleeping with us," Crycek said and you could see he meant it. "I'm not having this . . . *guy* sleeping with us. No damn way."

"Now what's your problem?" Fabrini said.

"My problem? Jesus Christ, are you all blind? Can't you see it on him? Can't you *feel* it? He isn't right. Something got to him and there's no way in hell I'd close my eyes with him nearby."

"Oh, for chrissake," Saks said.

But Crycek looked stern . . . and crazy, ready to do just about anything. "I mean it. He's not sleeping with us."

"Why, Crycek? Is he a fucking ghost?" Saks said.

"Maybe he is."

Saks burst out laughing. "Oh, c'mon. Ghost, my white ass. Next thing you'll be telling me is that Richard Simmons has a dick."

Menhaus looked unhappy. "You know what? I'm pretty tired here. I'm goddamn hungry, worn out, and I'm not in the mood for this nonsense."

"I don't give a shit," Crycek said. "I won't sleep with him in our cabin."

Makowski just looked around, confused.

"Good going," Saks said. "Now you got Crycek all worked up again. C'mere, Crycek, let daddy hold you against his tit."

"Shut up," Fabrini said.

"All of you shut up." Cook rubbed his temples, massaging away the headache they all gave him. "Crycek? You bunk with us. Menhaus? You take Makowski in with you."

Saks seemed to approve. "Sounds good. We'll take Mr. Slim Loony and you get Crycek. Give the three of you time to be alone. You can get a nice circle jerk going in there. Fabrini can do a striptease and show you his pussy."

And that's all it took.

Fabrini almost knocked Cook to the deck getting at Saks. He'd had his fill and now Saks was going to get his. He made it right over to him, Saks grinning the whole time. Fabrini reached out for him . . . and stopped.

Saks had his knife out and the blade was pressed to Fabrini's belly.

"Go ahead, you fucking wop," Saks told him. "If you got the stomach for it."

Fabrini backed off, thinking about his own knife, but never pulling it because Cook and Menhaus got between them. Were both sick to death of this shit. Even jolly old Menhaus had had enough.

"Put it away, Saks," Cook said. "You know, we're all getting shit-tired of you and

your mouth. And we're getting really, really tired of your high school locker room wit. We've had enough. If you don't have anything good to say, then kindly shut the fuck up."

Saks laughed, put his knife away. "Take it easy, big chief. Don't go getting pissed-off at me if Fabrini can't take a joke. Shit, we all know that wop is an ass-pirate, don't jump me over his lifestyle choices."

"Just shut up, Saks," Menhaus said. "For once in your life, just shut up."

Saks started laughing. Menhaus getting a backbone to him was like Mister Rogers telling you to go fuck yourself.

Fabrini, calmer now, said, "You think we should post a watch?"

"Against what?" Menhaus asked.

"Nothing to watch against . . . unless you believe in ghosts, that is." Saks thought the whole idea was pretty funny. "Besides, I'm not standing out in that goddamn corridor all night listening to Fabrini moan while Crycek puts the meat to him."

"You mother . . . *fucker,"* Fabrini said low in his throat like the growl of a dog and launched himself at Saks again.

Menhaus and Cook stopped him, holding him back.

Crycek just stood there, managing to look amused and disturbed at the same time.

And Saks? He just smiled, loving it how he could push Fabrini's buttons so easily. Loved the power he had over the man. And the thing was, he honestly *wanted* Fabrini to come at him, to get in real close. Maybe Cook had been partially right when he said that Saks had a deep-set fear of being alone and that he wouldn't kill the others for that reason . . . but that fear didn't extend to Fabrini. He would've killed Fabrini. Happily so. You could see it in his eyes.

And what broke off all the fun and games was Makowski getting up and walking over to the porthole and saying, "None of you belong here. None of you. Tonight . . . tonight *she'll* come . . . and you can't be here."

"Who?" Cook said, chilled now.

Makowski turned and looked at them, a sick yellow smile on his face. His eyes were dark and empty like drained ponds. "You know who . . . and *she* won't want you here . . ." Saks wasn't smiling now.

If it was possible for him to be scared, he was now.

14

So, in the raft, they waited.

They waited for small terrors and big ones, they waited for madness in every color of the rainbow . . . and some out of it. For although the talk was light as they rowed deeper into the weed, they fully expected death in their hearts. They expected it from the sea or the mist and possibly both. They did not know what form it might take, only that it would be terrible and immense when it showed itself.

Gosling and George were rowing while Cushing kept watch for trouble.

Gosling was worried about them, even though he would never have said this aloud. He worried about their flesh and blood, certainly, but more so, he worried about their minds. Because there was only so much the human mind could be expected to take. Only so much a man could drink down and hold in his belly before it all came back up. The camel's back could only hold so many straws. And right then, he was thinking that those straws they were carrying were getting real damn heavy.

Cushing seemed to be taking it pretty well.

He had a well-disciplined scientific sort of mind. Regardless of how horrible the things in the mist were, he seemed to be able to rationalize their existence with a counterpart back home. For after all, he argued, even that big ugly jellyfish was really just a jellyfish. It was not some monster from hell.

Then there was George.

George was tough in Gosling's book, he was sensible. He was the sort of guy who could take a lot because he pretty much had an optimistic turn of mind to him. But that was wearing. A little at a time it was wearing, just as it was wearing on Gosling himself.

And maybe George wouldn't admit it, but he was beginning to fray around the edges.

Gosling didn't blame him, for he felt the same.

The mist, the sea, those goddamn weeds . . . they seemed to go on forever. It was all bad enough, of course, but the ever-present billowing fog definitely was not helping matters. How long could you be trapped in a raft in that thick, pissing fog before you lost it? There was something about fog that played havoc with men's minds. Gosling had seen it countless times at sea. The thicker the fog got, the thicker men's fears got. They became silent and morose and brooding. It was eerie and oppressive, claustrophobic and suffocating. It squeezed the soul out of a man a drop at a time. And when the fog cleared — as it always did at sea, sooner or later — men's minds cleared with it. They began to talk and laugh, clap each other on the backs, maybe feeling foolish for how the fog had gripped them, locked them down in a black, sightless box.

But what about in this godawful place?

What about here where the fog did not lift? Where it was always steaming and misting and haunted? How long could the human mind hold itself intact in that maze of bleeding mist?

There were times in these past few days . . . and even Gosling was no longer sure how long it had been now . . . when he had wanted to scream at that goddamn fog. Would have sold his soul just to part it like the Red Sea even for a few moments of clarity. It was

just . . . everywhere. And it got so you could not only see it pressing in like a shroud, but feel it and smell it and taste it. And there were times when Gosling was almost certain it was inside of him, coiling in his belly or filling his skull with gray, nebulous ropes.

These were things you could not think on.

But these were the things Gosling worried about.

And that was one reason he had them rowing. The physical exertion would be good for them. It would give them a sense of purpose, the feeling that they were not just drifting aimlessly, but in charge of their fates. And something like that was very necessary to the human spirit.

It needed something to cling to.

Something to struggle against.

But there was more to it than that. The weed was very thick now, impenetrable in spots. But there were channels cut through it and Gosling was just enough of an optimist to believe that those channels were taking them somewhere. Maybe it would be somewhere they'd wish to God they'd never seen when they got there and maybe there would be deliverance.

So they kept rowing, spelling each other.

Looking and watching and waiting.

And it was while they were doing this that Cushing suddenly said, "Something . . . there's something coming out of the mist."

15

Saks waited, too.

He waited for the ultimate breakdown of Cook's little command here. Because like death, taxes, and Fabrini's ass getting wet, it was only a matter of time. Some things were inevitable. You could hide your head in the sand or stick it up your own ass, but the bottom line was, they were going to happen. And the real question was: were you going to be ready to face them like a man . . . or were you going to be like Cook's little crew of ass cowboys and shit monkeys and have yourself a group hug and a good fucking cry?

He'd never in his life seen a more incompetent bunch than the four stooges here — Fab-rini, Cook, Menhaus, and Crycek. And don't forget their new sidekick, Makowski, a.k.a. Slim Loony.

What a crew.

Outside of the Keystone Cops, you weren't going to find a bigger bunch of morons. It was pathetic. Sickening, even. There was no doubt in Saks's mind that they'd all spawned in the shallow end of the gene pool . . . and in Fabrini's case, the side with the frilly curtains and oiled-up cabana boys giving back-rubs and sucking sugar plums out of each other's mouths.

Jesus, it was like some kind of fucked-up reality show.

Cook, of course, claimed to be in charge. But, Saks figured, Elton John also claimed to be a man.

And if he was in charge, what exactly was he in charge *of?*

That was the real question. Because his crew wouldn't make anybody's top ten list. Crycek was crazy. Menhaus was a goddamn mama's boy. And Fabrini? Shit, Saks had heard of guys coming out of the closet, but Fabrini was the only one he'd ever heard of going back *in.* And then there was the new guy, Slim Loony, who had more kinks in his rope than a squareknot.

And then, of course, there was also Cook, like the poster boy for inbreeding, sitting atop this heap like a circus ape hoarding turds.

What it all came down to was that it was every man for himself and that spelled death on a spit in a survival situation like this. When Saks picked these numbnuts for the job back in Norfolk, he'd never imagined what sort of goddamn useless, sewer-sucking shitrats they would turn out to be. The biggest collection of limp-wrists he'd seen since the Village People reunion.

He found himself laughing at them.

At everything.

And *he* was the crazy one, they said.

They thought *he* was the real danger. Of all things. Saks figured he was their only true salvation. The only hope they had of surviving in this goddamn place. Because, the way things were going, they were all dead men in search of a grave. Cook had no leadership ability. Neither did any of the others. Given time — and they had plenty of that, now didn't they? — it was all going to come apart around them with Cook at the helm. He was the sort of guy that was all right for shining shoes and cleaning toilets, but you didn't want him at the wheel. No sir.

If Cook was smart, if he had the rudimentary smarts that God gave a dog's dick, he would have organized and did some planning. Every man should have been armed. Watches should have been set up. And that was just for starters. Because Saks might have been hard-nosed and practical, but he knew one thing for sure: they were not alone on the ship. *Something* was there with them. And that something was not just another nutjob like Slim Loony, but something else, something dangerous.

Something . . . *evil.*

Yeah, the way Saks was looking at things, it was only a matter of time before they wanted him to take charge again. He just wondered how many were going to be left by then.

16

Crycek woke to the sound of scratching.

Right away he started thinking rats. Started thinking *big* rats. Because the sound he was hearing at the door was not a little sound, but a big sound, the sort of scratching noise that goes up your spine and scrapes around in your skull. The cabin was dim, though not exactly dark. Cook and Fabrini were sleeping. Everyone was sleeping. Except for Crycek and what was outside the door.

Saks had said there were rats on the ship and he also said that was a good thing, because when the food ran out . . . and it was going to, yes sir . . . then rats could keep a man alive. Some parts of the world, he said, rats are considered a delicacy. But listening to that metallic scratching out there, like tenpenny nails drawn over rusty iron, Crycek wasn't so sure about rats.

You know better than anyone else that this ship is not empty, a chill voice said in his head. *There's something here listening and watching and waiting. Not the Other from the fog, the devil-thing . . . no, not that. That was big, gigantic, cosmic . . . this was localized. What waited here was . . . was . . . more of an echo, a sentient lunatic echo . . . something starving for company . . .*

It was not a scratching at the door now.

It was a tapping. A gentle rapping, tapping like in that poem by Poe Crycek had to memorize in tenth grade. *Tap, tap, tap.* Yes. And who exactly was that tapping at the chamber door? Crycek did not want to know, not really, yet he swung his legs off his bunk and sat there, wondering and willing whoever or whatever it was to just go away. Go scratch at Saks's door. Go anywhere but here.

Tap, tap, tap.

See, now it wasn't sounding so much like a harmless tapping, now it was sounding like fingers drumming impatiently. And if it was fingers, then it had to be a person . . . didn't it? But who would be out there now? And if they wanted to come in, why didn't they just use their voice?

Yes, fingers drumming now. Whoever owned them was not going away because they knew Crycek was in there and they knew Crycek was awake. That he could hear what it was they were doing. Come out and play. *Come out, come out, wherever you are . . .*

Crycek licked his lips and his tongue felt thick, ungainly. "Cook," he said in a whisper. "Cook . . ."

But Cook was sleeping and that's the way it had to be, Crycek knew. For whatever was out there wanted it that way. It would have it no other way. What waited beyond that door was for him and him alone. And the very idea of that filled him with a numb, white silence. The terror on him and in him was so extreme, so marrow-deep, that he thought he would have slit his wrists if a razor had been handy.

He thought: I'll go back to sleep because I'm probably not even awake.

And outside the door, those fingers kept tapping and drumming. They were getting impatient. For some reason — and Crycek could not begin to imagine what it might be — whoever or *whatever* was out there, could not just burst in, they needed to be

invited in. Like a vampire scratching at your window or clawing at your door, you had to let them in. But why? Crycek did not know, but maybe it was just the politics of this particular virus of madness.

Crycek got up, stood over Fabrini for a moment, but Fabrini was lost in a deep, almost narcotic slumber from which there was no waking. Cook was stretched out like a body on a slab and was pretty much lost to the world.

Crycek turned to the door.

He stopped two or three feet away, balling his hands into fists so they wouldn't inadvertently reach up and pull the latch, let that clutch of creeping shadows come whispering in. Because it was there: a need to open that door. That crazy, suicidal urge the human animal has at times, to destroy itself completely just for the morbid thrill of it. Like having a gun in your hand and wanting to feel the cold steel of the barrel against your temple or wondering what it might be like to dive out a tenth-story window. The urge was there. And at times of great stress or confusion, it became active, wanted to assert itself. Such a time was now for Crycek. His fingertips were actually tingling, wanting to feel the latch beneath them. Wanting to know it. Just as his ears wanted to hear the creak of that latch, his eyes wanted see that grinning malignancy on the other side, just for one shivering second before his mind blew apart from the sheer horror of it-

"What the hell are you doing, Crycek?" a voice on the other side of the door wanted to know. *"Why are you just standing there, you goddamn idiot? What aren't your hands opening this door and letting me in?"*

That voice . . . maybe not real at all, maybe just echoing through the silent corridors of his brain . . . it was human, or nearly so. But funny. Like it was full of wet sand. Crycek recognized the voice: it was Morse. Captain Morse. The skipper of the *Mara Corday* and Crycek's boss.

He wanted to come in. He sounded pissed-off and desperate.

But was it Morse? Maybe Morse had survived and maybe he hadn't. Maybe there was only this voice and nothing corporeal to go with it.

"Crycek? Crycek, what in God's name do you think you're doing?" Morse said with that thick, slopping voice. *"Don't you know what I've been through? Stuck out in the darkness where there's nothing to touch and nothing to feel? Open this door, boy. Open it right now. That's a goddamn order . . ."*

Crycek felt tears welling his eyes.

Felt his hand going up to the latch, his fingers brushing it, something on the other side of that door getting excited, breathing hard, almost panting now with a wet, drooling sound. Oh yes, it was happy, so very happy.

"Crycek."

It was Cook. He was sitting up in his bunk. His eyes were shining black bb's. "What the hell are you doing over there?"

Crycek started to say something, but stopped . . . he honestly wasn't sure what he had been doing. "There was someone . . . someone at the door. They wanted to come in"

Cook's voice was thin, dry. "Who? Who was at the door?"

"It . . . it was Morse," he said. "Captain Morse."

"Morse is dead, Crycek."

Crycek nodded. "Yes, he is . . . but he wanted to come in anyway."

With that he went back and laid on his bunk, something like a distant scream sounding in his head.

17

Maybe they were expecting a sea monster.

Maybe they were expecting something worse. Truth was, in that goddamn place, they wouldn't have been truly surprised to see Santa and his reindeer come winging out of the mist with the Easter Bunny bringing up the back door. Got so you were willing to believe anything in that place. It was easier that way.

But what they got was another lifeboat from the *Mara Corday.*

"Hey, you bums over there!" a voice called. "You got any damn beer?"

"Yeah," Cushing said, "we got a keg we just tapped."

"Don't forget to tell 'em about the strippers," Gosling said.

They rowed over to the lifeboat and saw that Marx, the chief engineer, from the ship was on board. He had two deckhands with him, Pollard and Chesbro, both kids that hadn't yet seen twenty-five. When introductions were made, George saw that while Marx — biker-bearded and bald, tough as lizardhide — seemed okay with all of it, the two deckhands were not. Pollard looked shellshocked, like he'd just crawled from the trenches. His eyes were glazed and staring, looking into the mist at something no one else could see. And Chesbro . . . he kept saying how it was all God's will.

George liked that.

He wasn't big on religion, but he didn't have a problem with faith, figured it could be a good thing if you were leading it and it wasn't leading you. Problem was, you said something was God's will, it was just another way of throwing up your hands and giving up. And looking at Chesbro, you could see he'd definitely given up. He was a thin kid with sparse red hair and freckles, like Richie Cunningham with dead gray eyes, despair clinging to him like lichen to a rock.

It was almost heartbreaking looking at these two.

So young and so . . . empty.

Not that George himself was exactly full. He wasn't exactly sure what he was these days. It was hard to be sure. Sometimes he was filled with a nagging hope and at other times, bleak with pessimism wondering what in Christ they were going to do when the food and water ran out. When he thought about it, he could not be honestly sure how long they had been in the fog now. A few days probably . . . no more than three or four, but, dammit, sometimes it seemed like it must have been a week or a month or a year. And when he tried to remember life before the Dead Sea, life back in the *real* world . . . he had trouble. It all seemed blurry and indistinct like a photo of a flying saucer or bigfoot. Purposely out of focus. Like trying to recall a dream clearly half way through the day. Seemed that maybe he'd never been anywhere else but here and the rest of it was just something he'd dreamed about.

And Christ, he knew that sort of thinking was trouble.

But he thought it all the same.

He kept thinking: I got a wife and a kid out there somewhere, light years from this place probably. Somehow, some way I got to see them again. I just have to. I can't die in this hellhole, I just can't. The idea of them spending their life with some half-baked idea that I was lost at sea is unthinkable. I gotta get out of here . . . if only for them and not for

myself.

Marx was talking about the supplies in the lifeboat and how if they pooled everything they had, they could survive well over a month. “By then, First,” he said to Gosling, “we had better come up with something.”

“God will grant us what’s needed if he wants us to survive,” Chesbro said.

“Oh, shut the hell up with that,” Marx said, a big man with tattooed arms, looked like he’d could hurt somebody bad, he got the notion to.

George was thinking that was something Chesbro might want to remember.

Gosling seemed to forget about George and Cushing right away, was just happy to be reunited with his old shipmate . . . and drinking partner, if the stories they were swapping were even half-true.

Cushing climbed over into the lifeboat, tried talking with Pollard, tried drawing him out of his shell.

George just sat there, taking it all in. New blood. It was exciting and somehow depressing at the same time.

“Can’t say exactly where this shitter is,” Marx said, “south of the goddamn *Twilight Zone* and north of the Devil’s Triangle. You go figure. But, way I’m seeing it, if there’s a way in, there’s a way out. Gotta be a back door around here somewhere.”

“You wanna be careful of that,” Pollard said, not looking at any of them.

They all stared at him. He had been silent for days, Marx said, and him speaking was big news, like Ghandi busting a move.

“Careful of what?” Gosling said.

“That back door,” Pollard said. “Never know where it might lead.”

And that was it. Pollard’s jewel of the day. He would speak no more of it and even Marx bullying him brought no results.

“Just leave him alone,” Chesbro said. “He’s scared. He’s been through a lot.”

“No shit?” Marx said. “Has he really? Well, I haven’t. I just been sitting here pulling my meat and hoping Jesus would see us through this pigfuck. I haven’t been trying to hold you goddamn pussies together for the past three days with spit and hope and snot, now have I? Trying to keep you alive when things came out of the sea with empty bellies and big shitting teeth. Guess again, Chesbro, we’ve *all* been through a lot. Each and every one of us. But you don’t see me shutting down, do you? Or the First here? Not even Mr. Cushing or Mr. Ryan. No sir. They’re all ready to slap ass and slide dick. They got their peckers out and are just looking for some sweet hole to fill. You know what that is? That’s called being a man.”

Chesbro, true to form, was mumbling prayers under his voice. He looked up at Marx. “I put my faith in God,” he said. “Whatever happens here, will be His will. I don’t care how tough you are or how tough you think you are, Chief, there’s things here a lot tougher than you.”

“Sure as shit there are, dumbass. I’m just saying that we got to buck up and take it. We all wanna get out of here, don’t we? Well, if we’re dead, that ain’t gonna happen . . . now is it?” He looked over at Pollard, shook his head, looked like maybe he wanted to clop him upside the head. “Case in fucking point, Chesbro. Goddamn Pollard here. You want us all to drop to his level? Sit there with that hang-dog, where-is-my-fucking-mommy look about us? I mean, hell and ice, look at him. Looks like he got cornholed by

a striped ape with a bowling pin for a pecker, got his shit packed so tight he don't know whether to squat and push or call the Roto-Rooter man. You want us all to sink to that?"

But Chesbro was praying again, looking close to tears.

"It's been a tough business from square one," Gosling said. He was looking on Pollard with a sort of compassion and that much was obvious. "It's been tough on everyone."

"Sure," Marx said. "People handle it different ways, I suspect. But, way I see it, we got a hell of a plot to hoe, we don't stick together and toughen up, we might as well drop our pants and jump in that slop, let the first thing that swims by make a sandwich out of our bare asses."

"Amen to that," Cushing said.

George wasn't sure what to make of Marx. He was a tough bastard, to be sure, not exactly sympathetic, but something told him the chief engineer was okay. Down deep, he was a good guy . . . you got past the salty language.

Marx maybe read his mind, because he looked over at George, smiled, stroked his mustache which was flecked with silver. "Don't mind me, boys, I just go off sometimes. I'm not so bad as I sound. But we got to toughen our asses up. That's how I see it. Every man for himself doesn't wash dirty shorts here. We gotta stay tight and stay hard. Am I right, First?"

"As rain," Gosling said. "As always."

Cushing cleared his throat. "But Pollard's right, you know."

"How's that?" Marx asked.

"In saying we should be real careful of that back door. In this place, we should be careful of *every* door." He had everyone's attention now and that was what he'd wanted. "Way I see it, we slipped through some kind of door into this place, some kind of warp, if you will. Vortex. Time/space distortion. Wormhole. Call it what you want. If there's a doorway into our world there just might be doorways into others. We had best be careful we don't walk through the wrong one."

That gave everyone something to chew over in their minds.

"I mean, some of the things we've seen here . . . some of the local wildlife . . . who can say if it's even native to this place? It might have been pulled in from other places. Maybe."

George thought that made sense. Most of it was probably native, but some of it could have been as alien as they were. Possibly. Just a theory, but it held some water when you thought about it. And George had been thinking about such things. "I like it, Cushing," he said. "Who knows? Maybe all those crazy stories of sea monsters sailors reported, maybe they were things that got vomited out of this place and into ours."

"Sure," Marx said, "why in the Christ not? I shipped with a boilermaker out of Baton Rouge when I was first a deckhand. Claimed he saw something off of the Ivory Coast like out of one of them prehistoric movies, long neck and all, Loch Ness monster-type. Said it was pea-green and had teeth like knives. Dove before they could get a good picture of it. Maybe that shitter swam out of here."

"Sounds like a plesiosaur," Cushing said.

"Sounds fine to me," Marx said. "Fucking sea monster, all right. You seem to know your science, son. You a scientist or some shit?"

"No. I just like the stuff, natural history and all that. A hobby, I guess."

George knew he was being modest. Cushing was a trove of information. And as George well knew most hobbyists knew more about their chosen obssessions than did most experts. When something was your blood and soul, rather than your bread and butter, you lived it. You drank it and breathed it and slept it. He figured Cushing was like that.

"Well, we can sure use your head," Marx said. "When we find that way out, we'll let you pick door number one or two or three."

George thought that you just had to admire Marx's energy level. He was always up, always ready to tango. To a guy like him, pessimism was unthinkable. Not among his natural rhythms. If you were to ask him, George figured, Marx would have said that pessimists weren't nothing but sissies with philosophy and good diction.

Gosling said, "Let's rope the raft to your lifeboat and do some rowing. I have a feeling these channels through the weed here, by accident or purpose, lead somewhere. And I want to know where that is."

"And there's a drift here," Marx said. "And it's pulling us in that general direction. Sooner or later we're going there, might as well row our nuts off and get a look at it before it gets a look at us."

Chesbro looked like he was going to say something, but shut his mouth.

Which George figured was probably a good thing.

Marx explained to them that anyone else that got spit into this place would drift in the same direction, chances were. So that if there were other survivors they would be up ahead. "And who knows? If this is the same place that's been sucking ships and planes out of the Triangle and the Sargasso since god-knows-when, they're probably up there, too. Jesus, we could find a good boat . . . I could get my hands on some engines and fuel . . . shit, I'd either push us back home or make one hell of a stab at it."

And that, George realized, was about as close as you were going to come to a reason to live in this place.

It was too much to hope for . . . but it was better than drifting and brooding. He had a funny feeling they were poised at the edge of revelation. He just hoped it didn't have big teeth and an empty belly.

18

When Menhaus came awake, he knew instinctively something was wrong.

His eyelids fluttering open, he could not put a name to it. But he could *feel* it, same way you can feel someone in the darkness with you. You do not need to see them or be told that they are there, you can feel it. An invasive sense of *presence* . . . no less palpable than fingernails drawn up your spine.

Saks was snoring lightly.

Menhaus could not see Makowski. It was too dim in the cabin. Shadows nested like snakes, finding each other, combining, mating, breeding a slithering brood of shifting darkness.

Menhaus tried to blink it away, for there was something positively *unnatural* about that darkness.

He listened. Yes, he could hear it. He could *hear* the darkness.

Just a subtle whisper of motion, but he'd sensed it, felt it somehow. And now he heard it: a wet, dragging sound. Like a soaked, moth-eaten blanket dragged over the floor. Swallowing, he pulled himself up on his elbows, craning his neck, listening. There. He heard it again. A secretive, moving noise. Menhaus imagined that's how snakes would sound in the dark . . . but it wasn't snakes; he knew that much. Not here. Not in this dead ship in the boundless graveyard sea. No, this was a stealthy, intelligent locomotion. The sound of something *trying* to be quiet. Something that knew it was being listened to and was trying not to be heard.

He wanted to write it off to imagination, to nerves, but he was beyond all that now.

For not only could he hear it, he could smell it now.

A rank, wet smell. The stink of something from the bottom of a pond.

Carefully, Menhaus found his lighter and flicked it into life.

"Saks?" he whispered softly. *"Saks?"*

Nothing. Saks was out cold.

Only that rustling, breathing motion.

Menhaus swung his legs over the bunk and hopped off. But quietly, a cat dropping soundlessly to the floor. He snatched one of the candles they'd purloined from the lounge and lit it.

Makowski's berth was empty.

No, not empty. Not exactly. There was a form there, a shape, a sense of solidity. Makowski was there, all right, but wrapped in a net of shadow.

Except that the shadow wasn't moving . . . it was not evaporating as the light hit it.

Yes, as he approached Makowski with the candle the darkness did not retreat. It hung over him like a shroud. Blacker than black, glistening and wet, an oil slick of shadow. It seemed to almost *shudder* at the intrusion of light like it was not shadow at all, but something pretending to be shadow.

Menhaus felt his heart seize momentarily in his chest.

Makowski was enveloped in the stuff.

He looked like he'd been dipped in tar.

As Menhaus brought the candle closer, closer, the mass began to slide off of Makowski, running like hot wax from his staring face. A thick, serpentine clot of it deserted his open mouth with the sound of viscera yanked from the belly of a fish. He began to convulse, to gag and sob and tremble. The black stuff was like tissue, fleshy and convoluting. You could see the flex of alien musculature beneath that neoprene skin.

Jesus, it was alive . . . living blackness.

Menhaus saw, for just one brief insane moment, a face in that blackness. The smooth, shining mockery of a woman's face grinning at him . . . then it melted away and maybe it had not been in the first place.

He wanted to scream.

Wanted to, but his throat was constricted down to a pinhole. Shaking now, he held the candle out towards the retreating black mass. It moved quickly now, seeking darkness in which to hide in. One crazy, insane moment he could see it fluttering and shifting, the next it had vanished into the shadows or become the shadows.

Menhaus stood there helplessly, the candle flickering wildly in his trembling fist, throwing nightmare shadows over the bulkheads. He wanted to collapse, to cry, to yell, but his lips were glued tight.

Makowski, however, found his voice.

It was a high, mad wailing that filled the cabin, reverberated and pounded through the still air. He fell to the deck and screamed and howled and sucked in great, wheezing lungfuls of air in-between. He fell against Menhaus who nearly dropped the candle, knowing damn well he could not drop it. For if it went out, if it went out . . .

Makowski was clutching his legs like a terrified toddler, his mouth frozen open, spraying spittle and horror: *"IT'S ALL OVER ME CAN'T BREATHE CAN'T-"*

Menhaus first tried to kick him away, then went down on his knees, setting the candle on the floor, letting its radiance keep the darkness at bay. He took hold of Makowski and shook him, tried to shake the madness out of him. Makowski fought in his arms like a freshly landed salmon, twisting and turning and clawing at him, out of his mind with panic.

"STOP IT!" Menhaus cried. "STOP IT! MAKOWSKI! STOP IT! IT'S GONE DAMMIT! IT'S GONE AWAY, DO YOU HEAR ME?"

Finally, he slumped into Menhaus' arms, weightless, powerless, curled up on his lap like a sick child, just shaking, damp with sweat. His hands furled and unfurled.

Saks was out of his bunk by then. *"What?"* he demanded. "What the fuck is it?"

And what was Menhaus to say? The shadows, he was attacked by the shadows? But saying something like that sounded even crazier that seeing something like that. So he said nothing, feeling his heart racing and his breath coming hard.

Saks was staring at him. "Well? What in the fuck are you two pussies screaming about?"

Menhaus had a sudden, irrational need to laugh. But he didn't. Instead, he found his voice and told Saks what he'd seen. "I saw it. By Christ, Saks, I mean I *really* saw it."

"I'll bet you did," Saks said bluntly.

"Fuck you, Saks. What the hell do you *think* happened?" Menhaus said fiercely, his eyes glaring with rage. "You think we both goddamn well dreamed it?"

Makowski was not saying a thing. His eyes were wide and glassy. Wherever he was, it was a lonely place and certainly not a very good place.

There was a pounding at the door, Cook saying, "What the hell's going on in there? Unlock this goddamn door."

Saks, tittering under his breath, did. "Hey, Cook, c'mon in . . . we got a ghost in here."

Menhaus helped Makowski into his bunk. "I never said ghost," he told them. "Ghost is not what I said."

"Okay, peaches, call it what you want. Ghost, spook, oogie-boogie man. Jesus H. Christ, Menhaus, I bet you still wet the fucking bed."

"Kiss my white ass."

"All right, all right," Cook said. "Settle down. Just tell me what happened and Saks? Just zip it for once."

Menhaus, sensing an ally, told Cook everything. There really wasn't much to tell and by the time he was done, he wasn't even sure if he believed any of it. Sounded like some bullshit story you told around a Boy Scout campfire.

Cook said, "But the light drove it off?"

Menhaus nodded.

"All right. Keep a candle burning then." Saks didn't say a word.

Menhaus knew Saks might be acting like some hard-headed rationalist asshole, but he believed, all right. He believed everything Menhaus had said. He just couldn't bring himself to admit it was all.

"Saks?" Cook said. "Come over to my cabin. I want to talk with you. You okay here, Menhaus?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Fine."

He was thinking about the black tissue, wondering what it was and what it wanted. Was it trying just to suffocate Makowski? Was that it? Or, given time, would it have devoured him, bones and all? It all made Menhaus remember when they'd first rowed through the weed around the *Cyclops.* At the stern, there had been a patch of oily darkness in the water, shifting in the weeds. Not a shadow exactly. Like a shadow, but more solid. Cook had seen it, too.

And what had Crycek said?

Something . . . something bad got these people. It slipped up from the darkness below and got them . . .

Yeah, Menhaus did not doubt that at all.

He could hear Saks and Cook out in the corridor, arguing with lowered voices. Knowing Saks and his ways, it could go on for some time.

"It was my turn," Makowski suddenly said.

Menhaus turned, his flesh gone rigid. There was a chill moving up the small of his back. "What? What did you say?"

"It was my turn," he said again. He turned and looked at Menhaus, his head revolving with an almost mechanical slowness like that of a puppet. His eyes were glistening and mad. "It was my turn tonight and you ruined it."

"I . . . saved you," Menhaus mumbled.

But Makowski just shook his head. "She'll come again . . . when she's ready.

Maybe tonight or tomorrow. Maybe this time she'll come for you . . ."

19

"It's just something you need to see," Saks was saying. "You're in charge and you have to know about things like this. I'll just be glad to wash my hands of it."

Cook didn't like the idea. Didn't like it at all. Going on a walk with Saks made you wonder if you were going to come back again. Made you wonder a lot of things. Fabrini was against it, of course. He did not trust Saks and never would. Cook told him just to stay with Crycek, that they were going to look at something and Saks said it was the sort of thing that Crycek definitely should not see.

"You think I'm up to something, don't you?" Saks said to him when they were moving down the companionway to one of the lower decks. Just them and that great creaking ship, the kerosene lantern creating macabre shapes around them.

"Are you?" Cook said.

"No, I'm not. Shit, Cook, I'm just trying to help you out here. Way I see it, you the man. You're in charge. Okay . . . then you better see this. Maybe it's nothing, but maybe it's something. You don't wanna? Fine. You think I'm luring you down here so I can knife you, then let's go back right now."

They went down that fungi-strewn corridor past staterooms that were rusted shut. The air was congested with a briny, stagnant odor. After a time, you almost got used to it. Almost.

Saks stopped before a stateroom door. "It's in here. I found it after we first came aboard, when I took my little tour."

Cook nodded. He remembered Saks coming into his cabin after his little tour, as he called it, saying he heard scratching in the walls, thought it was maybe rats. Had a real funny look in his eyes that Cook had thought was either fear or something like it.

Cook said, "I think Fabrini and I checked this door, it was locked tight. Rusted shut."

"Well, it wasn't rusted shut when I came down here," Saks said. "It was open."

Those words hung heavy in the air, full of dark implications Saks wasn't about to put into words.

Cook said, "Maybe . . . maybe it was just locked from the inside. Maybe Makowski was hiding in there."

Saks smiled. "You think so?"

Cook took hold of the latch, the door groaning as he pushed it inward. The sound was sharp and creaking like nails pulled from a coffin lid. It went right up his spine, sounding to him as if the door was screaming. In the light of the lantern, dust motes and flakes of filth swam like sediment disturbed in the bowels of a sunken ship. Everything in there was dirty and crumbling, like what you expected in an Egyptian tomb. The porthole was so thick with grime it looked practically furry.

But what paused Cook at the doorway was the smell in there. He could not immediately associate it with anything else. Certainly, there was a dry tang of age and nitrous decay and rust, but there was more, too. An inexplicable odor that reminded him of ozone, a sharp and heady almost chemical odor mixed with older corruption.

Right away, Cook figured that was trouble.

"You don't want to go in there, it's okay with me," Saks said, maybe smelling it, too, or feeling it down deep as Cook had.

But Cook shook his head. He was expecting some smartassed comment from Saks, something about him being afraid of the dark and pissing himself . . . but it did not come. Saks's eyes were wide and bright, almost fearful. There was a tic in the corner of his mouth. As they entered the room, Saks started to say something half a dozen times, but promptly shut his mouth. There was an almost infantile sense of confusion about him in this place. He would start in one direction, stop, reverse himself, then start again only to take a faltering step back. That's how Cook knew that it was inside Saks, too. That like himself, he could not find his center here, could not get his bearings. This place had a strong, withering negative psychic charge that filled your mind with whispers and reaching shadows. Psychologically, it felt like the end of the world . . . beyond even, shivering blackness trying to suck you down into nothingness.

"Jesus, but I don't like this fucking place," Saks said.

Cook did not either. A terror, vague and half-formed, was prickling the back of his neck. This place was sucking him dry. He felt something like a wild, hysterical scream building inside him.

"Show me," was all he would say.

Saks led him over to a writing desk pushed in the corner. The dust on its top was disturbed, maybe from Saks's earlier visit. The metal of the bulkheads was riddled with holes like great ulcers. You could see into the cabin next door through them. In the far corner, amongst the debris and settled dust, there was something like soap flakes strewn about. Looked like somebody had scaled a fish in there, a big fish . . . but many years back, for the flakes were curled and brown like autumn leaves.

Cook did not want to think about what that might have meant.

Saks pulled open a drawer on the desk and took out an old leather-bound book with a clasp on it like a journal or a diary.

"You better read what's in here," he said.

So this was it. Another goddamn book, another confession of nightmares. Cook, his hands trembling now, began to page through it. The first ten pages were blank. Then they began to be filled with stunted paragraphs, quickly scribbled odds and ends written in a woman's flowing hand. She claimed that her name was Lydia Stoddard. That she had been aboard a sixty-five foot two-masted schooner called *Home Sweet Home* with her husband, Robert, and five others. They were apparently en route from Bermuda to Antigua in January of 1955 when they found the fog or it found them. Entry after entry told of the *Home Sweet Home* floundering in the becalmed, fog-enshrouded sea. Of people disappearing until it was just her and her husband. The entries began to get very jumbled and incomprehensible, the handwriting was practically illegible. About all Cook could figure was that the *Home Sweet Home* had to be abandoned for some reason. That Lydia and Robert packed up a dinghy and floated for days until they found the hulk of the *Cyclops.*

Cook sighed. "Why am I reading this?"

But the look Saks gave him told him it was important, so he read on:

January 26? 1955

I have not written for several days. I do not wish to write now. I am so alone in

this place and I think I have lost my mind. I do not know where I am now. This ship is the Cyclops, I know that much. It disappeared during the First World War and I remember hearing something about it. But I can't seem to remember exactly what.

This place is purgatory or limbo, some borderland on the outskirts of Hell. Perhaps God is punishing us. I do not know why he would punish us. Robert and I have been good people. We have done nothing wrong. We do not deserve to be marooned in this awful place.

Oh dear God, why? Why?

What have we done?

Robert is very sick now. I think he may be dying. He is feverish and disoriented. He thinks I am his mother and I do not know who I am. My mind seems to wander and I'm not sure what is dream and what is reality.

Last night or maybe a few days ago . . . I can't be certain . . . I walked on deck and I saw something like a huge and glistening snake laying over the decks. When I approached it, it moved, slid away back over the side. It must have been the tentacle of some sea monster. There are horrors in the fog. Strange beasts and worse things, things that try to get inside my head. But I will not let them inside my head.

Oh, God, I hear things. Things on the ship. But I must not be hearing them. It must be in my head.

I am so scared now.

So scared.

If Robert dies, I will be alone.

Oh, God, give me the strength to take my own life. Please.

January 27? 1955

I am not alone here.

There is another.

A woman.

I hear her at night.

She hums to herself out in the corridor.

Humming, humming, humming.

January ? 29

Robert is dead. He must be dead. He does not move and he is so very cold. There is no pattern now. Life is a maze, an arabesque, and I can find no way out.

I cannot sleep.

When I close my eyes, I hear Robert calling out to me. Why does he call out to me when he is dead? Sometimes I think he moves, but the dead do not move and I wonder if maybe I am dead, too. Can I be dead? For surely I am not alive in this place.

No, I cannot sleep.

Last night or tonight, I can't be sure, I awoke feeling hot breath in my ear, smelling something decayed leaning over me. I could not see it, but it was there. It was telling me awful things. It wants me to commit suicide. I hear it at night, I hear it whispering to me out in the corridor. I lock the door tight and huddle with Robert. But it can see me through the door and I can feel it smiling at me.

I think it is a woman.

Yes, just like I thought.

I think the other is a woman.

Perhaps she is mad and perhaps she is trapped here, too. But she is dangerous. She is a lunatic. She has been hiding down in the black, stinking confines of the ship. I think she eats rats. She must live on rats. Oh dear God what must she look like after all these years eating rats and living like a mushroom in wet darkness?

She cannot be human. Not like me.

Oh, the voices? How long must I hear those voices?

February 5?

I am afraid all the time.

The woman will not leave me alone. Even during the day . . . what I think is day here . . . she haunts me. She chases me through the ship. I barely made it back today. And then she was out there, scratching at the door. She knows my name. Somehow she knows my name.

Food is running short. What will I eat next? I will not eat what she says I must eat.

Robert opened his eyes and spoke to me. He said: "If you're hungry enough, you'll eat anything, my pretty little darling."

No, no, no, I wasn't going to write that down. None of it.

Robert is dead, dead, dead. I must remember that he is dead and the dead do not speak.

Not like me.

Not like me.

Not like me.

February 10?

Yes, I am scared all the time.

How long can you be scared before you stop being scared?

Only a little bread left that is moldy. I will eat the mold, too. Yes, I will. Watch me eat the mold. It is green and yeasty-tasting. It turns my stomach.

I killed a rat.

It was delicious.

February 11?

I am not afraid of the woman.

She wants to be my friend and tells me so.

Last night or today or maybe last week I heard her humming down the corridor. That incessant, lunatic humming. I took my knife with me. My knife and a candle. I will stop that humming or it will stop me.

I saw her.

A misshapen, dwarfish creature in rags. Her face is white as a corpse. Her eyes are yellow. She was waiting in a darkened cabin for me. I wanted to kill her. She would not speak to me. She would only hum. She has a puppet. I saw it. A little puppet on wires that she makes dance. Oh dear God, it is not a puppet . . . it is a mummified infant. It has yellow eyes, too. It smiled at me and began to drool. It was wrapped in a dirty blanket and I could see things moving beneath that blanket. The puppet infant has too many legs.

I locked myself in my cabin.

Something has been eating Robert's corpse. Rats. They must come in when I am

out. Come in and chew on him.

Terrible.

February 15?

The woman is not my friend. She is horrible.

She does not hum now. She sits outside the cabin door and whistles. The whistling is melodious, yet eerie. She likes to whistle as I eat my dinner. That whistling makes me think things and do things I cannot remember later.

Why does she torment me? What does she want?

Why does she keep scratching at the door? Fumbling with the latch.

I will not let her in.

She wants my food and I will not share it.

She and that puppet-baby are hungry. Let them eat rats.

Robert says our food is not to be shared.

It is secret our food. Our secret food.

Let them be hungry.

Hungry.

Hungry.

Hungry.

Cook stopped reading there.

It was terrible, like a dirty window looking into a madhouse, a guided tour of a woman's mind going to rot. It was very unnerving. There were things she was not writing about. Awful things. Like what she was eating and Cook had a pretty good idea what that might be.

"Why do I need to read this?" he asked Saks.

"You'll see. Just keep going."

"This is pointless."

"No, it's not. It'll make sense to you when you're done." His eyes were bulging, his face twisted into a grimace. "You don't like it, do you? Well, I didn't like it either. You know what it was like for me? Down here . . . alone . . . reading that warped shit, sure I was hearing things out there. Funny things. At least you got me with you . . ."

Cook sighed, picked up the book again.

February 21?

I hear things at night or maybe in my head.

Different things now. Like snakes crawling against the door. How can there be so many snakes? And why do they whistle? But maybe it is that insane woman and maybe it is me.

I am confused.

I do not know.

The walls make me crazy. The bulkheads have rivets only they are not rivets. I know they are not really rivets. Yes, they are tiny yellow eyes that blink and watch and see. They like to watch me to stare at me I am never alone now. Never ever never. Those eyes want to know my secret things that I have locked up in my head. But only I have the key. Yet they stare and leer and watch. They're waiting for something. Waiting for me to do something.

But what?

I cut smiling mouths into my palms with the knife.

The mouths wake me up.

They like to scream.

February 25?

The insane woman still haunts the corridor.

Oh, she thinks I do not know what she wants.

But I know because I can think with her mind as easily as with my own. Ha, ha, ha. She didn't expect that.

Still, she creeps in the corridor. The sounds she makes. Patter, patter, tink, tink, tink. She must have a dozen legs to make sounds like that.

The creeping.

The hideous creeping.

Oh, how it echoes even now.

February 26?

I woke spun in webs.

She must have gotten in while I slept. She is very sneaky with her loathsome creeping. The webs were all over me. I couldn't see them, but I could feel them. Oh, sticky and clinging and wet with spider mucus. Gossamer strung with pearls that must be eggs. Eggs for puppet-spider babies. Hee, hee. What an image that conjures? But I know it to be true, so very true. Out there, walking and creeping about with all those legs.

Do they think I do not know?

Yes, I woke spun with webs.

As I walked through my cabin, they were strung everywhere. Like spiderwebs breaking across one's face . . . but imagine a thousand million spiderwebs breaking over your face at once.

Be quiet. They're out there now . . . the lady and the puppet-baby. Can you hear them creeping? They have a thousand legs.

I know their game.

I know her game.

Creeping out there and staring through holes in the walls.

Does she think I cannot hear her whispering those profane things?

March

That puppet-spider baby is crying.

It cries out in the corridor, creeping on those long black legs. It is hungry. It wants its milk. It sucks the milk from things wrapped in silk high up in its web.

I hear it nursing at night.

It wishes to nurse on me, little puppet-spider baby. I saw it through a hole in the wall and it saw me. It has many eyes and they are all black.

It needs to nurse.

I will let it nurse on me, sweet evil puppet-spider baby. Yes, yes, yes. It scratches over my bare belly. It is hairy and plump and gurgling. I let it nurse at my breast. Its teeth are very sharp. Its mouth is slimy.

Sucking and sucking.

The feel of its tongue lapping makes me scream. I like to scream.

March?

Creeping in the corridor.

I hear her creeping even now.

She has more than one child and they all have many legs. A thousand creeping legs.

I have only two.

But I have ten fingers.

I can make them crawl.

See how they crawl.

Over walls and over faces.

Lovely spider legs, see them creep.

March 27

i creep up walls

robert does not like it

does not like what i have webbed up

tasty things in webs yes

i have many legs with which i creep and crawl up walls and down walls over floors and under cabinets

it is such good fun

the face of my lover: flyblown and grinning, soft and pulpy with white bone bearing teeth marks. i paint his face with kisses he tastes sweet beneath the cobwebs i have spun over him he is safe in a gray coccoon.

she will not have him

i have chased her and her leggy babies down below for i am queen and i eat children with yellow snapping teeth i eat spider babies their meat is rich their blood brown like gravy cold gravy

i seek dark damp corners to spin my webs places i can creep and crawl and slink i dream of basements and cellars and webby places

i hang over Robert

he is my lover so i cocooned him laid my spider eggs in him

creeping

always creeping

waiting for my spider babies to be born

when they are born we will eat

my lover tastes so sweet

robert

like candied meats love his taste like candied meats

i creep and i wait

The entries as such ended there.

Cook was sweating and shaking. It was all the mad ramblings of an insane mind, yet he almost half-believed it, crazy and improbable as it all sounded. His heart was pounding and he could not hold the book still. He was angry. Angry at a God that would allow this woman to become a lonely, deranged thing that maybe had to eat her husband's corpse to survive. Angry at Saks for showing it to him and maybe angry at that woman herself for invading his mind, spinning lustrous webs in the corners where things breathed and crept and light would never touch. He did not want to see these things. Did not want

to ever feel them.

"You're not done yet," Saks said.

"No, you're fucking wrong, I am done," Cook said, filled with hatred now. "You can stay if you want, but I'm going."

"No, you're not," Saks said, blocking his way. "There's more. Just look at it."

Cook toyed with the idea of hammering his way through Saks with his fists, but instead he just picked up the book. Blank page after blank page. All of them yellowed and going to pieces.

What was the point?

Then he saw. More writing.

A single sentence repeated, but at the intervals of a year each time:

March 27, 1956

Another lovely day!

March 27, 1957

Another lovely day!

March 27, 1958

Another lovely day!

In fact, the rest of the diary was just this repeated again and again every March on the anniversary of Lydia Stoddard's madness. Something about that really sucked the wind out of Cook. The funny thing was, the real disturbing thing, was that these cryptic little entries continued right to the present year . . . but went no farther. As if Lydia's ghost showed up once a year to scribble in the diary.

"She must . . . she must have written these entries back in 1955," Cook said, knowing it sounded thin as a sliver.

"And she just happened to pick this year as the year to stop?"

"C'mon, Saks. You're a little too hard-headed to believe in ghosts."

Saks smiled. "Ghosts wasn't what I was thinking. Not exactly."

"Then what *were* you thinking?"

But Saks did not answer that. "Do you know what today's date is?"

"No. My watch stopped working-"

"Well, my digital works just fine. Today is the twenty-seventh of March."

Cook felt a chill on his arms. Sure, it was easy to believe absurd, frightening things like that and especially in this cabin with the drifting dust and age and that oppressive atmosphere that just seemed to drain you dry minute by minute. But Cook wasn't going there.

He said, "Maybe . . . maybe Makowski forged this shit."

"You don't believe that, Cook, and neither do I," Saks said. "Unless you're willing to take a real wild leap here and say he wrote the *entire* thing. But that's a woman's writing and we both know that. The entries from the fifties are faded, the newer ones pretty fresh . . . now how would that fucking idiot pull that off?"

Saks was right. The forgery angle was silly . . . but there had to be an explanation, didn't there? Or was it just this place? This goddamn nameless dimension where anything went. Because, deep down, that's what he was thinking. Lydia Stoddard went slowly and completely insane here. All alone, her mind went to pieces. Who could blame her? She was long dead, certainly, but what if her madness was not? What if it came back once a

year? If that was even remotely possible, they were all in serious danger.

Saks said, "You heard what that freak Makowski was saying, stuff about *her* coming back and *her* not wanting us here. Jesus, Cook, I'm getting some ideas here and I don't like 'em."

"We better get back. I don't like the idea of leaving the others alone."

Saks picked up the diary, paged through it. "What the hell?" he said. He dropped the book on the desk, backing away from it.

Cook knew and did not know. He picked up the diary, thought it felt warm in his hands, like something alive. He saw today's entry . . . then he saw something else which had not been there five minutes before. What he was seeing could not possibly be . . . but it was there, glaring and fresh, daring him to talk it away with nonsense like logic and reason. But Cook could not talk it away, could not make sense of it, he could do nothing but stand there, terror oozing out of him like bile . . . hot and sour and rancid-smelling. He could hear himself breathing with a dry, rattling sound like a dying breath blown through straw.

He kept staring at the diary and what he saw, just beneath what had been the last entry, was this:

March 27
i am waiting
i am waiting
waiting
waiting
hear me creeping
i am coming
now

Cook dropped the diary with a little cry of revulsion, for in his mind, he suddenly saw it sprout segmented legs, becoming not a book, but something bloated and pale and hairy. Something that like to creep.

He looked over at Saks and Saks's face had gone bloodless, his eyes were huge and wet and filled with a wild sort of horror.

"Listen," Saks said. *"Listen . . . "*

And there it was, coming down the corridor: a high-pitched, mournful whistling/wailing sound, like some eerie dirge piped from a throat stuffed with ashes and dry things. It carried a profane melody to it.

Jesus. Cook felt his heart suddenly just stop dead in his chest like something had gripped it . . . it stopped, then began to beat so fast he thought he would pass out. Droplets of cold sweat burst out on his forehead. His lips felt as though they'd been tack-welded shut.

Saks was scared.

Scared like Cook had never seen him before and never wanted to see him again. All that tough-guy machismo had melted away into a tepid shivering puddle. The gray streaks in his hair looked positively white and those bags under his eyes were like pouches.

Cook could only imagine what he must have looked like.

That whistling came again . . . only it was not so distant now, it was closer and

more shrill. And there was something morbidly seductive about that melody it carried, made you want to stay put until you could see the mouth that sang it.

"She's coming," Saks said.

Cook had his gun out.

He took hold of the lantern and walked out into the corridor and it took every bit of strength he had. There was nothing out there. Nothing but clutching shadows that seemed viscidly alive and coiling. Motes of dust spinning in the light. No, there was nothing there, but there soon would be. He was smelling that sharp stink of ozone again because lightning was about to strike. Something was about to strike . . . something creeping and leggy and impossible. Something grinning and insane and lonesome. The sort of grin that haunts your childhood nightmares . . . just a smiling mouth with long yellow teeth and no face to go with them.

The whistling came again.

Came with a volume that made them curdle inside.

It was so close . . . it could only be around the next bend in the corridor. And Cook thought . . . yes . . . thought he could hear her coming, all those legs scratching along the bulkhead like a thousand scraping nails.

Run for godsake! a voice was shouting in his head. *Get the fuck out of here . . . if you see what comes around that bend, if you see what comes creeping along the wall . . .*

They started running, pounding through that fungus and nearly going on their asses half a dozen times. They went up one companionway, then another until they reached the deck. They could hear that mad, insectile skittering behind them, something like a braying laughter echoing through a black and shuttered attic . . . and then Saks slammed the hatch on the deckhouse shut, secured the latch.

And almost immediately, on the other side, the sound of many things rasping and clawing against the rusted steel door. Things like knives and hooks and awls.

They ran until they found their cabins.

And did not dare breathe until their doors were shut and locked.

20

They were rowing and making some distance, according to Gosling. It was an ungainly craft they had roped together, the lifeboat on one side and the oblong raft on the other. But with two men on either side pulling with the oars, they were indeed moving.

Marx and Gosling took their break together, as the other four pulled.

"We're going to come onto something," Marx said. "I can feel it now."

Strange thing was, Gosling could feel it, too. They were going somewhere and he could feel it in his bones. A certainty that they were getting close to something.

"Way I'm figuring this whole shitting thing," Marx was saying, "is that we're going to be finding some boats. We've got to. And maybe people, too, because this drift leads somewhere. A dumping ground, a junkyard . . . whatever in the Christ you want to call it. Wouldn't you say, First?"

Gosling nodded. "There's something out there. I know that much. I guess I keep wondering, thinking that if we survived this, then others must have, too."

"You . . . you try your VHF?" Marx asked him.

"Yeah. There's nothing out there, nothing you want to hear."

"We tried it for a time . . . but some of the shit we heard out there, well, it didn't do my boys much good. Didn't do me much good either. Just that static out there . . . never heard static like that before. Now and again . . ."

"A distress call?"

"You got it. But crazy, spooky shit. Maybe we imagined it."

"Not unless we imagined it, too."

Marx looked thoughtful. "You ever see any of them Devil's Triangle shows on Discovery or one of them?"

"Sure."

"You probably heard about Flight 19, then?"

Gosling had. Happened in 1945. Five Navy torpedo bombers took off from the Naval Air Station in Fort Lauderdale and flew into oblivion. A search plane sent out to look for them vanished, too. No wreckage found, not so much as a slick of oil. Even all these years later, it was one of the great Bermuda Triangle mysteries, a point of great controversy.

"Well," Marx said, "we kept picking up distress calls. Some fellow saying how they were flying into 'white water' and then later, one about being 'lost in the fog, the bottomless fog.' It was pretty spooky stuff. I didn't link it up with Flight 19 until I heard something on the VHF a few hours later. 'FT, FT, FT, FT' . . . just repeated on and on like that. You know what 'FT' was?"

Gosling shook his head.

"That was part of Flight 19's call letters." Marx swallowed. "You're probably wondering how it is I know that, how I might remember such a thing."

Gosling, staring out into the fog, was wondering exactly that.

"Well, I'll tell you." Marx rubbed his eyes, looked very uncomfortable suddenly. "Had me an uncle, named Tommy. My old man's younger brother. I never met him. He was a radioman on one of those Navy Avenger bombers that disappeared out there all

those years ago. Now and again, my old man would get in a funny mood, start talking about the Brooklyn neighborhood he was raised in. Soon enough, he'd be talking about Uncle Tommy and what happened to him. The old man didn't buy the official U.S. Navy line about them just going down . . . all those planes, without a spot of wreckage. He didn't believe any of it. The old man was of the mind that something out there reached out and grabbed Tommy and the rest of them boys. He would never say what he thought it was. But it haunts him to this day."

Marx went on to say that his old man was in his eighties now. And every December he went down to Florida on the anniversary of Flight 19's disappearance, out to Ft. Lauderdale and just stood there for a few hours, staring out over the sea, remembering his brother and praying for him.

"Yeah, the old man's getting on in years, First, but sometimes he still talks about it. Told me he talked with some of the other crew members' families and none of them believe what the Navy said either. Still don't." Marx shrugged. "I'm thinking Flight 19 ended up here. In this goddamned place. Maybe, maybe if I could find some trace of it out there and get my ass out through one of them doors Cushing was talking about . . . well, I think my old man could die in peace finally knowing. But one way or another, First, I got to get out of here. I don't want my old man dying thinking that something out there took his son, too."

Gosling patted his arm, knowing it had been hard for Marx to admit any of that. Like most sailors, he wasn't given to airing his family secrets in public. Wasn't given to showing a hint of the softness all men had at their core. What he had shared with Gosling was almost a sacred thing and Gosling knew he had to treat it as such.

"I'll do anything I can to help," Gosling told him.

"Hell, I know that, First. I knew you would without me even squeezing my soul out to you. That's the kind of man you are. Everyone on the *Mara* knew that."

Gosling managed a smile, uncomfortable as always with anything approaching praise. He swallowed, said, "What happened to Pollard?"

But Marx just shook his head. "Don't know exactly. Like I told you, when the ship went down, I was treading water . . . then along comes the lifeboat with Chesbro in it. We didn't come across Pollard until we got into the weed. He saw something, I know that . . . something that peeled his mind raw. But he won't say what."

Gosling could just imagine. For he remembered after the fog first encased the *Mara Corday,* remembered Pollard running on deck, half out of his head then, saying how something had grabbed Burky . . . the guy on watch . . . and pulled him out into the fog. Pollard had been in bad shape then . . . but what had he seen since?

"I tried getting that little shit to talk," Marx said, "but all he wants is his mommy and I ain't his fucking mommy."

Gosling laughed. "I love you like a brother, Chief, but you're not exactly real sympathetic."

"Never claimed to be."

"What Pollard needs is someone real easy to talk to. Somebody with some compassion."

"You for chrissake?"

"No, not me. But I know just the guy."

Then they were both looking over at George and he was looking back at them and wondering what in the hell he was doing wrong to get those hard-assed swabbies staring him down like that.

Marx went over to relieve Pollard on the oars, gave him a ration of shit for being crazy and spooked, said the first sea monster they came across he was throwing his shitting ass to that mother. Might even season it first so it tasted better.

Gosling smiled as he replaced George at the oars.

Marx. Jesus, he was something else, all right.

21

Saks would not tell Menhaus or Makowski where he had gone with Cook. He refused to say anything about it, just that they had business to hash out in private. But Menhaus saw how Saks had looked when he came back. Like he was all bound up, needed to shit something out but couldn't find the proper opening.

After that, for the longest time, in the flickering orange candlelight, Saks just sat there with his knife in his hand and a dangerous look in his eye. Now and again, he'd cock his head as if he were listening for something he just did not want to hear.

"Rats," he finally said after a time, "ship's full of rats."

"Rats?" Menhaus said.

Saks nodded.

Menhaus was beginning to believe that to Saks, 'rats' was the key word for anything he couldn't or wouldn't put a proper name to. A metaphor for just about everything unex-plainable aboard the *Cyclops.*

"I ever tell you, Menhaus, about the rats in Vietnam? Jesus, but we had rats there. Millions of rats. Bastards big as cats, sometimes bigger. They loved our dumps. They'd come into camp at night."

Saks looked sullen with the memory, as if he could see them running in packs in his mind. Smell them and hear them squeaking.

"Did you poison 'em out?"

But Saks didn't seem to hear the question. "I was a Seabee, Construction Battalions. We put in air strips and docks and roads, threw together camps in godforsaken places." He shook his head. "My first classification was gunner's mate. So when the river rats, the river patrol sailors, took some bad causalities and were under strength, they would yank guys from other units to build the riverine forces back up to strength. Yeah, they pulled my ass off a big Cat dozer and stuck me in the stern of a PBR, a river patrol boat, on the fifty cal. Had to pull that shit for a month until the replacements made it in-country. What a clusterfuck that all was. Cruising around that stinking brown water down in the Delta, blowing the piss out of little villages. Taking fire and giving it back. Riding herd on all those sampans out in the channels. Most of 'em were just gook fishermen, papasan and his fucking net, but now and again you'd run across some VC."

Menhaus wasn't really in the mood for war stories. He was watching the shadows and thinking about that black, oozing tissue that had nearly consumed Makowski. Wondering if it was coming back and if he'd really seen that woman's face in it.

"What's the rivers have to do with rats?" he said.

So Saks told him. "One day, the chief gets a call from an A-6 pilot. There's some barge drifting downriver, looks derelict. We gotta go check it out. Quick-and-dirty like everything else. The brass says that hulk is a hazard to navigation and the chief is pissed. Hazard to navigation? Down there in the fucking mud flats? Sheee-it. Command says for us to take a peek at her, if she's derelict, they'll have some UDTs or SEALs go in there and blow it."

"So you went aboard the barge?"

"Sure as shit we did."

“What did you find?”

Saks clenched his teeth, then said, “It was like this tub . . . dirty and rusting, taking on water. Full of spiders and slime and stinking of decay. Thousands of flies. We found a weapons cache and called it in. Then we found the bodies . . .”

About twenty VC sappers had been using the barge as a staging point. They had weapons and ammo, explosives and det cord, the works, Saks told him. All the shit they needed to cause all manner of suffering and trouble. The bodies had been there over a month and were just black and rotted, the worms all done with them. Just husks like mummies. But they were chewed-up looking, their bones full of teeth marks.

“About then, the rats show,” Saks said. “Hundreds of ‘em. Their eyes were red in our flashlights. Red and glaring and hungry. Those rats were hiding in the dark corners and debris . . . but when they saw us, they were hungry enough to come out. Just starving and slat-thin, having picked those bodies down to bones, they wanted some meat and they were going to have it.”

Saks said they came charging out of the darkness, all squeaking and chittering and snapping their teeth. The sailors opened up on them, drove most of ‘em back, but still dozens got through, biting and clawing and drawing blood.

“What did you do?”

“We got off her in a hurry. But you know what?”

Menhaus shook his head.

Saks grinned. “Those fucking things were so hungry, they dove off the ship into the water, started swimming after our launch. Hundreds of ‘em. The chief flooded the water with fuel oil and lit it up. Fucking barbecue. What a smell. Jesus lovely Christ, I’ll never forget that smell. The A-6 pilots came in and dropped napalm on the barge until she was nothing but a blackened, smoking hulk. They put a few missiles into her and down she went.”

“Damn,” Menhaus said. “Of all things.”

“You know what?” Saks said to him. “That’s why I hate this fucking hulk, because it smells just like that barge. Like vermin and bones and death.”

22

Of course George didn't know much about Pollard, thought he'd seen him around on the *Mara Corday* once or twice, but had never actually spoken to him. It was Gosling's idea for him to have a chat with Pollard. Pollard needed someone to talk to, a sympathetic ear. That's what Gosling said. So while the others pulled at the oars, George was sitting with Pollard in the back of the raft.

"There's some bad shit in this place, isn't there?" he said, trying to break the ice.

Pollard didn't even look at him.

"I hear you were adrift by yourself for a time."

Pollard shrugged.

"Must have been tough being alone out there."

Pollard cleared his throat. "I wasn't alone."

Contact. "Who was with you?"

Pollard looked at him briefly, as if he couldn't believe George was quite that naïve or stupid. And you could almost see it in his eyes: *You're never alone here, George, haven't you guessed that yet?*

"I went overboard with Gosling. We bobbed around in our lifejackets, Christ, for hours and hours, maybe most of the day . . . what a day would be back home . . . and then we found this raft. Thank God for that."

He hoped that would be the wedge he'd need with Pollard, but Pollard still said nothing. He just stared off into the fog, now and again squinting his eyes as if he were looking for something, suspicious of something.

"Whatever you're looking for," George said. "You won't find it out there."

That got the thinnest of smiles from Pollard. Other than that, his face was still dead as cemetery marble. His eyes were hollow, blank things which emoted about as much as bullet holes in driftwood. Now and then, his lips quivered as if there was something he really needed to say . . . but that was about it.

George gave it another shot. "What is it you hope to see out in that soup?"

Pollard said nothing.

Jesus, this guy. Getting into his head was like trying to pick a lock with a hairbrush.

"Do you know why I'm sitting here with you?"

That got Pollard's attention. "Because they told you to."

"You're right," George said. Maybe being truthful here was the proper tact. "Don't take it the wrong way, I might have come chatted with you anyway . . . but, yeah, well, they're worried about you."

Pollard seemed unimpressed by that.

So George said, "I know Marx has been riding you like . . . how would *he* put it? Like a swayback mare? Like a five-dollar mule?"

Pollard almost smiled at that.

"Marx is a hard guy, I know that," George said to him. "Gosling has his moments, too. But I wouldn't be too quick to judge them or write them off as assholes. They're dealing with all this the best way they know how, which is toughening up. They won't

allow weakness in themselves or others. Gosling told me you were in the Coast Guard once. Well, you know how it was in the Coasties, you know how those guys get bullying each other. It's the same here."

Pollard was looking at him now.

"Sure, think about it. Marx is a tough guy. That's pretty easy to see just looking at him. Looks like he should be riding with the Hell's Angels or one of those outlaw biker gangs. He's not a guy I'd want to piss off. But you know what? You know why he's riding you?" George asked. "It's because he's fucking scared. He's scared like I'm scared and you're scared. He just shows it different, is all."

Pollard blinked his eyes. "I know."

That was something. George worked it, thinking maybe when he got back — *if* he got back — he was going to get off the construction gangs and become a therapist. George Ryan, blue-collar therapist. The Dr. Phil of the working class. "Sure, you know. Marx is all wigged-out about you and you know why?"

"Because he's scared?"

George shook his head. "Partly . . . but mostly because there's only a handful of us. And me, you, Cushing, and Chesbro? We're the meat of their command, Marx's and Gosling's. They need us as much as we need them. They've got some ideas on what we're going to do here and I think they're pretty good ideas, but without us, they're screwed and they know it. They need us. And the idea that their command, their crew is disintegrating around them, well, that's enough to put them over the edge. Do you see?"

George was just rolling with it, wasn't even sure he believed everything he was saying, but, dammit, if it all didn't sound pretty convincing. Regardless, it was enough to begin thawing Pollard a bit. And that was something.

Pollard didn't say anything for a few moments, then, "I keep looking out there . . . I keep looking for Mike."

"Mike?"

Pollard nodded. "Mike Makowyz. We called him 'Macky'." Pollard smiled for a moment at the memory of it. "Macky. He was my bunkmate. Me and Macky and another guy, we shared a cabin."

"Did he go down with the ship?"

"No. We both made it off her okay . . . Mike's arm, I think it was broken, but other than that he was okay."

Pollard opened up then, like a flower he bloomed and let the sunlight in. And once he started, nothing could stop him: "We . . . me and Mike . . . we had lifejackets on, we were drifting on a crate. I don't know how long. Only that we got into the weeds, the real weeds like here, before the rest of you. I don't know why."

"What . . . what happened to him?" George asked.

Pollard shook his head, his face sallow and drawn. "We were hearing things . . . things in the water, other things roaring out in the fog. Awful things. Big things moving out there and roaring . . . like some sort of prehistoric monsters. We were scared shitless. Mike was thinking we'd went through one of those time warps like in a movie he saw, that maybe we were trapped on the back side of the Jurassic or Triassic or one of those. I thought he was nuts at first, but then . . . well, those *sounds,* Jesus. I guess I was sort of expecting one of them monsters with the long necks and the big teeth . . . they got one in

Chicago at the Museum there, thing's gotta be seventy, eighty-feet long, has flippers like a whale . . . one of those things, those sea serpents to come gliding out of the fog and bite me in half. Christ, I don't know what I was thinking. Just that I was scared shitless and I couldn't believe any of it had happened. Maybe I still don't."

George licked his lips. "Did something come out of the fog?"

But Pollard shook his head. "No, not really. Something came out of the water. Two things came out of the water."

"What were they?"

"They got Mike," Pollard said, his hands balled into fists now. "They came out of the fucking water *and they took him."*

Pollard started talking fast then, not making a lot of sense to George, but purging what needed purging. He started talking about another guy, someone called Burky. How Burky was a good guy and all the crazy shit Burky would do in port, always with a couple black hookers on his arms, crazy old Burky taking the boys to back room card games and shows with dancing transvestites. How Burky had been on watch and Pollard had come to relieve him right after they went into the fog. And how Burky had been just fine, saying how he was hearing flapping sounds out in the mist like big Jesus birds, joking around about it, but kind of scared, too. And everything was just fine and then Burky lit a cigarette and, *bam,* something out there . . . like a bird or a bat with big scaly wings and a sideways beak like a sickle . . . swooped out of the fog and took him right over the side into the mist. Right in front of Pollard. Just goddamn took him and it was like nothing you ever saw in your life. Just swooped down and took him without breaking stride. And Pollard saw it carry him into the mist and the goddamn evil, horrible thing was laughing and laughing.

"Laughing?" George said, feeling the flesh at his spine moving now.

And Pollard nodded, his eyes dark as flint. "Yeah, laughing . . . it was fucking laughing, but an insane, shrieking kind of laugh like a laughing hyena. The sort of sound . . . just echoing, mocking . . . Christ . . ."

George just sat there, feeling numb, feeling doped-up, unable to say a single comforting or reassuring thing.

Pollard was breathing hard, squeezing his fists so tightly you could hear the knuckles popping. "And Mike . . . oh then those things got Mike. That bird just went past me and got Burky, then . . . then those others, they got Mike, you know? Came right up and got him. Not me, but Mike."

And maybe that was it, George was thinking. Twice now, two of his friends had been snatched away by things and Pollard himself had gotten away without so much as a scratch. Guilt. Maybe that was what was burning a hole through his soul. Guilt. Never him, always his friends.

George found his voice, said, "What got Mike?"

Pollard opened his mouth wide, looked like he was going to scream, then his mouth slowly closed as if the jaw muscles were being gradually paralyzed. "That fog, that terrible goddamn fog . . . you know how it looks? How it's dirty and vile and polluted-looking and you hate it. Deep-down you just hate that filthy stuff, like smog just hanging there like a fucking blanket. But other times . . . those sounds, dammit, you're almost *glad* it's there. It hides you, you can hide in it and those *things* out there, you can't see

them and they can't see you. Me and Mike . . . we were hearing those goddamn awful sounds out there. Things screaming and growling, making slobbering sounds like mud sucked through a hose. We didn't want to know what those things were, we were afraid of what those things would look like . . . what they would do to us . . ."

George understood perfectly. "There's bad things out there."

Pollard gripped his arm. "You know? You know what I was thinking while we waited out there? I was thinking . . . Jesus, it's crazy . . . but I was just thinking that those things, them eating us wouldn't be so bad, because there were probably worse things they could do." Pollard cradled his head in his hands. "But Mike . . . what got him, it didn't come out of the fog, it came up out of the water. Out of that slimy, stinking water. *They* came up quick and I thought, I thought they were *people* . . . they looked kind of like people, people covered in seaweed. Green tangles of seaweed. Those faces came out of the water, except they weren't faces, but weeds, weeds that were alive and *crawling* like worms. One of them had an eye and that eye looked at me, right at me and it was a human eye, but . . . but crazy and psychotic, not human any more at all. They wrapped their weedy arms around Mike and Mike fucking screamed and I think I did, too, and those arms . . . all them weeds coiling and squirming like snakes . . . *they pulled Mike down and he never came up.* And I waited . . . yeah, I waited for hours and hours and maybe it was days, I just waited for those hands to take hold of me, those cold and worming hands . . ."

Sure, there was guilt and there was horror. There was a lot of horror, George figured. Pollard seeing those weed-people . . . for lack of a better name . . . taking Mike like that, taking him down into those black, oozing depths. And then Pollard alone, just waiting and waiting for those hands to take hold of him. Well, it was a wonder he hadn't snapped completely.

"It's over and I know it's over," Pollard said, somehow defeated and wasted now. "But . . . I keep thinking I see Mike out there. I think sometimes I hear him calling to me . . ."

George said, "We all hear things out there. But none of it's real. Maybe it's in our heads and maybe it's something toying with us, but it can't be real unless we make it real. We believe. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Just take it easy," George told him. "If you see anything or hear anything at all, just call me over, okay? I've seen things, too. We all have."

George went and spelled Cushing at the oars and Pollard did the same for Chesbro. He was feeling pretty good, feeling like maybe he had some sort of sympathetic gift here. He could pull guys out of their shells and maybe, just maybe, he could even talk monster jellyfish out of eating people in rafts.

"Well?" Gosling said.

"He went through some bad shit," George told him. "I think he'll be okay. But you might want to tell Marx to go easy on him."

"Already did," Gosling said. "Thanks, George."

George just smiled, thinking, *well that's my place in all this, I suppose. Marx is the engineer and Gosling is in charge, Chesbro's the minister and Cushing is the scientist. Me? I'm the therapist.*

Christ, of all things.

23

Menhaus had been watching the candle burn down. Watching the wax run down the stem and pool at the base. He kept thinking that all he really wanted to do was to keep that candle burning. Somewhere during the process, he must have dozed off even though he had pretty much given up on sleep now as an impossibility. Yet, it had happened.

It must have happened.

For the next thing he knew his eyes were opening and he was seeing not the candle, but Makowski standing there, head cocked like a dog listening for its master. He seemed to be swaying on his feet to some unheard music.

Or was it unheard?

Menhaus was hearing something, he thought. But something distant, a sound, a melody . . . but coming from far away and resonating only in the back of his head.

"Slim," he found himself saying. "Slim . . . what the hell are you doing?"

But Makowski did not answer.

He was staring at the door, hearing something that seemed to be intended only for him. His mental shortwave had locked onto some channel and that was obvious. He was receiving and the rest of the world had ceased to exist for him.

Menhaus turned and looked over at Saks.

"Yeah, I'm awake," Saks said. "The only one sleeping here is Slim Loony, I think."

And it did look like he was sleeping. Drugged or hypnotized, the way sleepwalkers often looked, that morphic gleam to their eyes. Makowski looked much like that. His eyes were fixed and staring, he was rubbing his hands against his legs. His conscious mind was locked-up in a box somewhere and his subconscious was at the wheel now.

Menhaus knew they always said you weren't supposed to wake a sleepwalker, but it was probably just one of those old wife's tales, a whaddyacallit, urban legend.

No, he thought, *I won't wake him . . . unless he makes for that door.*

"What do you think?" he whispered to Saks.

Saks just shrugged. He didn't give a shit one way or another.

Makowski just stood there, listening.

Menhaus thought he was hearing that sound again . . . or was he? A weird, uncanny humming or was it a whistling? He could just hear it, but not clearly enough to decipher its nuances, its rhythm and flow, not enough so that he could say without a doubt that, yes, he was hearing it.

He looked over at Saks and Saks had his knife out, like he was expecting trouble. His eyes were narrowed, his teeth set.

"What's going on here?" Menhaus said, because he knew something was. The atmosphere of the cabin had never been exactly cheerful and sunny, but right then it had gone positively bleak, crawling with something. A something you could sense, could feel like poison in your blood.

Saks waited, drew out that silence, said, "There's someone out in the corridor."

"No, I don't think so."

“There is,” Saks said with complete certainty. His eyes were filled with a dim, brooding light. Maybe it was just candlelight reflected and maybe it was something more. “There’s someone out there waiting for Makowski. He can hear it, whoever it is . . . he can hear it just fine.”

Menhaus swallowed, had trouble doing so.

Sure, he was picking up on it now, too. He wanted badly to tell Saks how wrong he was, but it just wasn’t in him. Because he was hearing something . . . a creaking or groaning out in the corridor and that sound, subtle as it was, set him on edge. Made his nerve endings tingle and the muscles of his abdomen pull up tight. More than just an old ship settling, more than just a creaking or groaning . . . this was the sound of occupancy, of someone waiting in the dankness out there. A secretive sound, one that was calculating and deceitful . . . and disturbing because of it.

Like someone sneaking into your house in the dead of night to steal your children or slit your throat, Menhaus thought.

He did not like it at all.

Makowski went to the door and stopped. Just stood there dumbly like a zombie in a canefield awaiting his orders. Menhaus sat up now, careful to make no sound whatsoever. And he thought: *C’mon, Slim, don’t open that door, please don’t open that door . . . I don’t want to see what’s out there . . .*

“Saks-”

“Shut up,” Saks snapped, but under his breath, trying damn hard to be quiet.

And now Menhaus knew why that was.

There was a very good reason to be quiet.

Because he was hearing it fine now, too. You could call it a humming or a whistling or even a singing, because it seemed to be all these things. It was a woman’s voice, high-pitched and piping. A discordant and vapid melody that rose and fell, an eerie off-key wailing that sounded hollow and distant and haunted . . . like a little girl’s voice echoed through the ductwork of a house, becoming something metallic and jangling and oddly perverse.

It created a tension in Menhaus, he felt his muscles bunch and his jaw clench tight. He thought it was the voice of an insane woman mourning at her child’s grave in a windy, midnight cemetery. For nothing sane could sound like this . . . it was the voice of something that crawled in dark places, hid in shadows.

Makowski reached up for the latch and undid it.

The sound of scraping metal was thunderous in the silence.

And a crazy voice in Menhaus’ head said: He’s just going to take a piss or something. That’s all it is. Nothing more than that.

But dear God, Menhaus did not believe it, for Makowski was bewitched by that strident melancholy wailing, he was being summoned and there was no way around that.

Saks was holding his knife now, gripping it tightly.

There was a momentary sound from down the corridor . . . a skittering, scratching sound.

Menhaus felt unreality settle into him, because this was how the human mind processed abject, overwhelming terror: It shut down and refused to believe the madness its senses fed it. And maybe his mind would not accept, but his heart believed with a

black certainty. For he could feel it at his spine, a cold and prickling horror that electrified his ganglia.

Makowski opened the door and right away, you could smell something dark and sweet and noxious.

Menhaus didn't know what he was expecting when that door slid open, maybe something with chattering teeth and long white fingers . . . but there were only shadows out there, knotted and spreading and bloated with some sort of spectral life.

That's when Menhaus got to his feet.

He was not a brave man, but there came a time when you had no choice. For that wailing voice was gaining volume now and there was a sense of creeping, slinking motion just beyond view. That door had to be closed before, before-

He grabbed Makowski by the shoulder just as he stepped across the threshold, the stink out in the corridor just black and repellent. He saw something . . . thought he saw something . . . creep stealthily into the shadows, just a blur, a suggestion. He tried to yank Makowski back into the cabin and Makowski slapped his arm away, looking at Menhaus with a venomous, rabid leer. It was the look a starving, mad dog might give you if you tried to steal its food. Just utter loathing and anger.

Before Menhaus could step back, because that's exactly what he was going to do, Makowski shoved him back with a flat palm against his chest. Menhaus was lifted off his feet and slammed into the bulkhead and with enough force that it knocked the wind out of him.

When he found his breath, he said, "Saks . . . Saks we better stop him . . . he's not right . . ."

But Saks just shook his head, his upper lip hooked in a scowl. "No, not me. Not out there . . ."

The door to the cabin next door flew open and banged against the wall. Cook came through the doorway with the Browning 9mm in his fist. His eyes were wild and pissed-off.

"What in the hell is going on in here?"

"Makowski went for a walk," Saks said. "Menhaus tried to stop him and he knocked him on his ass."

"Shit."

"Don't go after him," Saks said. "You heard it . . . I know you heard it . . . *she* was singing . . ."

Cook just said, "Lock this fucking door and don't open it again."

He stepped out into the corridor and told Fabrini the same thing. The door slammed shut over there. Menhaus passed a lantern to Cook, didn't try to talk him out of it, knowing that his own bravery was all used-up now.

"Shut that door," Cook told him and started off down the corridor.

When the door was shut and locked, Menhaus leaned with his back against it and glared at Saks. "You know what the difference between you and Cook is, Saks?"

Saks just stared.

"Cook has balls."

24

Cook did not want to go after Makowski.

He did not want to do anything but get behind that locked door in his cabin and wish it all away. But it was not that simple. Some part of him had accepted its responsibilities now. It had accepted that he was in charge and knew that if he did not do anything, did not set an example for the others . . . they would sit and rot and die.

He could hear Makowski going up the companionway to the deck above.

He was running.

He was in a damned hurry and Cook could just about guess why. That eerie, strident wailing was distant now, but still audible enough to create an awesome, childhood terror in Cook, one that made him want to run himself.

The hatch clanged open.

Cook could hear footsteps on the deck above.

He knew he should be hurrying himself, but he just could not bring himself to. For there were limits to everything. Limits to what you would allow yourself to do. He mounted the steps, taking them slowly, listening, feeling, watching, on guard now.

At the top, he stood before the hatch.

It was open two or three inches and in his mind Cook could hear Gosling yelling at the men about leaving hatches open. Dear God, there was a sort of comfort in hearing the memory of the man's cursing voice.

Cook pushed open the hatch, was ready to put bullets in the first thing that moved, even if it was Makowski. But nothing moved, nothing stirred. The decks were wreathed in shadows, the booms and coaling derricks rising up like alien tombstones. Cook stepped out, smelling the sea and the mist. The fog was thicker than earlier, churning like stormclouds. It was luminous and sparkling, reflecting a stark illumination like moonlight against the ship.

Cook walked further out on deck, looking in every direction, some giddy voice of self-preservation in him saying, well, so much for that. Makowski's gone, so you might as well turn back and get your ass below, because there's nothing to see here, nothing at all-

And, no, there was nothing to see.

Nothing but that yellowed light dappled by reaching shadows, but there was certainly something to hear: the woman. The thing she was or the thing that pretended to be her. It was singing its mourning dirge, loud then soft, pure and then dirty. It bounced around the decks, echoing off the superstructure so that it could have been forward or aft or three feet away.

Footsteps.

A creaking.

Then . . . oh Jesus, what in the hell was that?

It was a sound of motion, a busy tapping/scratching sort of sound ringing off the rusted metal decks. Like a hundred pencils tapping simultaneously and Cook knew that it was *her.* That she was making that sound, the sound of a thousand spidery legs.

The boat deck.

Yes, Cook saw now.

A shadow up there . . . it was Makowski's shadow thrown against a bulkhead by the ghostly, shimmering illumination of the fog. Cook could not see him, but he could see that shadow. It looked stiff and artificial, its owner more mannequin than man. An effigy and nothing more. The singing was louder now, the tapping, the creeping of too many legs.

Cook made to climb the ladder up to the boat deck . . . then he paused.

He was smelling that acrid, ozone-like stink again. It was sharp and nauseating, filled his mind with a sickly plastic warmth that was consuming, that shut him down on some primary level.

Cook teetered.

The voice was loud, very loud. Sweet and profane and somehow soothing.

He shook it off, put a foot on the ladder . . . and got no further.

She was coming.

Cook could not see her, not really, and he was grateful for it. What he saw silhouetted against that bulkhead above was her shadow approaching that of Makowski's. His was an inert form, something cut from black paper and immovable. Hers was hunched and contorted and bulbous, a chimeric thing that was not really a woman, but maybe two women slinking along in a gunny sack, trying to look natural. But whatever she was, whatever the lunatic memory of Lydia Stoddard had mutated into, subsisting on blackness and stark remembrance, it was not natural. She skittered along, hunched-over and lurching. She moved with the sound of crackling static electricity, with the sound of a thousand fingernails drawn over a thousand blackboards . . . squeaking and scraping and tapping and rustling.

Cook felt something die inside of him.

Felt it gasp its last breath and fall to moldering bones. Just the see-sawing shadow of Lydia Stoddard was enough to fill your mind with venom, enough to leech the light from your soul . . . but to look upon it, to actually see it in the flesh, moving and writhing and staring at you with a cold, remorseless appetite . . . that would have stripped your mind barren.

Cook knew he had to run.

Knew he had to get away before he saw something that would haunt his nightmares far worse than what he'd already seen, but he had to look. His thinking brain demanded proof that this could possibly be.

And it got it.

Got it as a scream filled Cook up, needing to be vented and coming out in a pitiful, airless gasp.

When the woman's shadow got within a few feet of Makowski's . . . she opened up, she bloomed like a spider orchid, erupted into a hideous collection of waving, clicking appendages that reached out like a hand, reached out and grasped Makowski.

And then Makowski screamed . . . screamed his soul out. Screamed like his guts were being pulled out with cold metal hooks. And maybe that wasn't too far from the truth. Cook turned away, the shadows above combined into one busy, clicking, chittering profusion of things moving and things rending, things spinning and things vibrating like the needles of sewing machines.

As Cook made it back through the hatch, he heard a wet and meaty snapping from

up there and then sucking sounds.

He ran.

He ran down the steps, not going on his ass, nearly floating down them. He found the corridor, his mind shut down, but his belly demanding that he stop and vomit it all out. But he knew that if he did, that if he let his knees find that slimy fungus-covered deck and let his mouth purge it all, it would not stop with what was in his stomach. He would keep retching until everything he was, was voided, until he was an empty shell lying on the floor, shaking and gasping and utterly mad.

There was no stopping. No hesitation. No nothing.

He made it to the cabins and pounded on the doors, the bulkheads, anything his fists could find.

And when those faces appeared, Cook said, “Pack it up . . . pack it all up. We’re getting the fuck off this goddamn morgue and we’re getting off right now . . .”

25

They moved fast.

Nobody asked questions, they just did what Cook told them, knowing there was a good goddamn reason for him wanting them off the *Cyclops.* They worked as a team and it was good for them, it was reviving and necessary. Crycek pitched in wholeheartedly, just glad to be leaving that ghost ship and its attendant nightmares behind. They packed up blankets and survival gear, filled three lanterns with kerosene and took the candles.

Then they made the corridor and Saks told them to stop.

"Listen," he said. *"Listen . . . "*

And they all heard it, heard *her* coming for them. Heard that creeping, skittering sound of her moving along the corridor and maybe not on the deck, but over the walls or ceilings, but definitely coming now. She was singing that unearthly dirge and maybe singing their names and counting their bones and drooling for their blood.

"Go the other way," Cook told them.

He kept the flashlight pointed down the corridor as Saks led the others off to the other companionway. Cook did not see her. He ran after the others just as she would have rounded the bend. He ran along, slopping through the fungi and he was the last one up the companionway ladder that echoed with frantic footsteps. His mind reached out for that door, for freedom, long before he physically found it and he was certain, dead certain, that at the last moment she would drag him back into the darkness, take hold of him and suck him dry of juices.

"C'mon, Cook!" Fabrini cried.

He got a hand hooked around the hatch frame and she was right behind him, hissing and breathing and clawing, coming on with a mind-numbing stench of mucus-licked cobwebs and dried carapaces. And then, just then, something looped around his ankle, then his knee, the bend of his left arm. Silk. A living, coiling, snaking silk roping over him and her breath was on him smelling of violated caskets as she tried to web him, pull him down.

Somebody screamed.

Cook brought the Browning back and squeezed-off three shots.

And broke free.

He did not really see what he hit. Just a chitinous-fleshed blur that was oily and leggy and what might have been a chewing black mouth dripping brown sap.

And then he was out, pitched face-first on the deck.

From the mouth of the companionway came a screeching, squealing roar.

"Close that fucking door!" he heard himself shout.

And then Fabrini and Saks threw everything they had into it and Cook heard it slam into something, something pulpy and moist like rotting fruit and then the door was shut, the latch secured.

And on the other side, she was scratching and grinding and rasping with all those needle-tipped legs.

They ran.

They made it to the boarding ladder and went down one by one while Cook stood

there with the gun in his fist. When it was his turn, he looked one last time and saw a flurry of limbs come bursting out of the mouth of a ventilator shaft. He did not wait to see what they were connected to.

When he made the lifeboat, Saks didn't bother untying the nylon rope, he sawed through it with his knife and planted a foot against the derelict and kicked off with everything he had. The lifeboat drifted out into the weeds. By then there were oars in hands and everyone was paddling madly, pushing the boat out towards the channel through that clotted weed.

"Row!" Saks was crying out. *"For the love of God, row!"*

And then the bow of the lifeboat cut through the weeds and into the channel and they were well out of her range. But they'd looked back, looked back just once as they pulled away from the ship. And she was waiting there, up at the top of the boarding ladder. Her face was a white blur like an out-of-focus photograph. But you could see her eyes and they were like yellow dying stars sinking into black godless nebula. Those eyes hated. They raged. But mostly, they hungered.

Cook saw her and so did the others.

But what he was really looking at were her hands above, hooked over the railing. They were not hands. They were discolored thorny claws.

Then the mist took her.

Took the *Cyclops* and buried it in a shroud of coveting fog.

"What . . . Jesus Christ . . . what was that?" Menhaus said.

But Cook would not say. Would never say. "Row," he said. "Just keep rowing and don't stop."

26

The fog was getting thicker and the men were getting tired.

Their arms were beginning to feel like rubber from all the oaring they'd been doing. But it was a good sort of tired. A physical exhaustion that none of them had felt in days and days and it sat on them just right, that weariness. They'd been mentally wrung-out for too long now and it felt good that their bodies were catching up.

They were deeper into the weed all the time and as yet, they had not seen a single thing worth noting except some debris out there. Bits of wood and what might have been part of a seat cushion once. Maybe these were things from the *Mara Corday* and maybe things from another ship.

The fog was a constant, of course.

Once again, it was growing thick as cotton fluff.

Opaque, expanding and blooming, rising up in dirty-yellow sheets and sparkling white tarps like oozing swamp gas. Boiling and surging and brewing with a boggy, filmy haze. Just a crazyquilt fusion of dirty sackcloth and moldering canvas with absolutely no boundaries. You could sit there, like George, and watch it happen. Watch the fog move and breathe and convolute, full of whirlpools and eddies and secret gloom, something fermented and distilled feeding off its own corroding, steaming marrow. Smell its sewer-stink of stagnant leechfields and leaf-clotted cisterns.

It was an odious thing, a misting desert that could swallow you alive, turn you around, smother you gradually in its own smoldering weave.

And as it grew thicker, the world went darker. That's how they knew night was coming on, what passed for night in this place. It had been brighter out for some time now, the fog and sea suffused with that dirty illumination that was and would never be a sunny day back home, but more of a rainy and gray overcast afternoon. But even that was coming to an end now. A darkness was being born out in the fog, a creeping murk and the light was fading.

But for how long?

That was really the question. How long was night here and how long was day? There had to be some rhythm to it, some pattern. According to what Gosling had told George, the only way he could accurately calculate how long they'd been out there was by his system of rationing food and water. And according to that, what they'd used so far, they were four days into the mist now.

Four days.

Jesus.

The first day, George knew, had been dark, the only real light was that coming from the fog itself. That must have been night. Though it was never nearly as dark as a dark night back home. That first day was night then and they'd had something like three days of daylight since. Did that mean it would be shadowy for a few more days?

Christ, the idea of it was almost too much.

And George was thinking: I'm trapped in a fucking Roger Corman movie.

Or maybe a Skinner box. Rats running the maze, enough food and water to keep them alive and a piece of cheese dangled before them to keep their minds from going

completely to slush. And that piece of cheese, of course, was the possibility they'd find land or another ship trapped out there. Anything would have been welcome. Just to put their feet on something solid, something big enough that you could walk around on and pretend you weren't trapped in that Dead Sea.

When things got really desperate, it didn't take much to satisfy the human mind.

But nobody has really gone mad yet, George thought. Not stark raving slit-your-own-throat mad. Not just yet. Sure, Pollard's disturbed, but that's not quite the same thing, now is it?

And it wasn't. He knew it wasn't. But it was coming and he could see it in everyone's eyes the way they could see it in his. Madness was out there, just up ahead maybe. Waiting. They couldn't drift in this murk forever. Because if they did, lack of food and water would be the least of their worries. The human mind could only take so much and that fog was suffocating them slowly and surely.

George looked out at the sea which was slimy and scummed in a membrane of algae and rotting organic matter. To all sides were those huge and heaving islands of decomposing weed. Yes, mentally it would kill them eventually and maybe physically, too. God only knew what sort of poisons they were breathing in minute by minute.

George sat there, feeling sleep heavy on him.

He was staring at the back of his hand when he realized there was light shining on it. A dim, dirty sort of light and it wasn't from the fog. He didn't know how long he'd been seeing it.

He looked up and saw where the light was coming from.

Everyone else was seeing it, too, staring up blankly at what was above them, above the mist.

"Well, I'll be a cocksucker," Marx said.

For above the mist, hazy and obscured, but still quite visible, the moon had come out. In fact, *two* moons had come out. The first, which seemed to be directly above them, was much larger than the full moon back home. This one was the size of a dinner plate and the color of fresh blood. The other, farther off behind them, was small and a dirty yellow-brown like an old penny pulled from a sidewalk crack.

Cushing just said, "Shit."

Gosling and Chesbro just stared up at those moons in rapt fascination, savages considering the face . . . or faces . . . of their god. Pollard refused to look, did not want to see them.

George stared dumbfounded, thinking for one moment that they were not moons at all, but eyes set in some gigantic misty face. But they were moons, all right. Alien and somehow spooky, but moons all the same. Satellites caught in the orbit of whatever this place was called.

"Well that settles it," Marx said. "This ain't the Gulf of fucking Mexico after all."

And that made George laugh.

Bad thing was, he couldn't seem to stop.

PART FOUR

THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

1

SO THEY DRIFTED THROUGH the weed for what might have been hours upon hours, or possibly days and weeks and maybe a year. Time was compressed in that place, flattened, drawn-out . . . it was plastic and shifting and refused to hold shape. It moved painfully slow or ran so quickly it left you dizzy. And maybe, just maybe, time did not move at all. Maybe it was stagnant here. Dead and rotted like everything else.

"And maybe it's all our imagination," George said.

They were on the oars again, pushing through that congested sea, through the heavy, grim fog which was a fuming mass of vapors and veils and contaminated brume. It drifted over the raft and lifeboat in snaking tendrils that looked like they wanted to strangle you, wanted to crawl down your throat and nest.

"What's that, George?" Gosling said, working the oars behind him.

"Nothing," he said. "Thinking out loud, I guess."

George felt the oar in his hand, liked the feel. It was something to hold on to, an extension of your own muscles and sweat and drive. It was a good thing meeting the Dead Sea as they were, meeting it and fighting it and maybe besting it with nothing but human compulsion, will, and hard work. And when your muscles were taxed, were aching and throbbing and flexed tight as bailing wire, well, it tapped your strength and that was a good thing. Because then your mind did not have all that extra energy to feed itself with, to create fantasies and nightmares that made your flesh crawl.

That's what George liked about rowing.

That's why he liked the feel of that oar in his hand and just wished he had two of them.

Because lately, well, his mind was turning a little too quickly and the old bullshit machine called imagination was spinning tales with the best of 'em. Things George shouldn't be thinking about. If he thought about them too much he was afraid they would become obsessions and that was only a few feet away from a full-blown psychosis in his way of thinking.

No time for that. Not here. *I've got to keep on my toes,* George thought, *and not just for myself, but for the others. They need me and, dear Christ, I cannot let them down. Not in this horrible place.*

And what of this horrible place? George's mind put to him. What about it? Have you ever really, really thought about where you are? And not in the context of whether this is an alien world or some dead-end dimension stuck between two universes, nothing like that. Because, George, you know that point is mute. It doesn't matter *where* this place is. Just a black corridor of cosmic insanity with earth at one end and something unknowable and unthinkable at the other end. There. That's it. But have you ever thought about what this place is and who might be behind it?

And, honestly, George had not.

Had not and did not want to. Sure, he'd given some thought to his little theory of the Fog-Devil, the Nemesis of this place. But he had never, for one solitary moment, let himself believe that this Fog-Devil was calling the shots. For Earth, they said, had its own devil, but he was not in charge of things. The creator, they said, had brought light and

breath and life into the world; the Devil just corrupted it when he or she or it got the chance. And George had applied this old world thinking to this new, awful place. This was not Hell, this was just a back alley of creation where terrible things crawled and slithered in the evolutionary soup. That's all it was. A dimensional sewer of the sort science fiction writers and even some scientists themselves had confessed might exist. That's all. Nothing more and this purely figurative, hypothetical Fog-Devil was just another of its natural/unnatural occupants.

But what if he was wrong?

Not about the Fog-Devil or any of that business, but about the very nature of this place? What if it was all the playground of some demented and arcane intelligence? Something that watched and learned, but showed itself no more than the watcher of a TV showed himself to the actors being taped? What if this was all some grand amusement for something alien and omnipotent, so far above man it could rightly be called a god? It was crazy thinking, but George thought it regardless. If any of that were true, though, then maybe all of this was in his head, maybe it was all images projected into his mind by something with the power to do so. It reminded him of an old *Outer Limits* episode where the crew of a downed bomber were trapped in a weird sea . . . only to discover it was a drop of water beneath some immense alien microscope.

"George," Gosling said. "Why'd you stop rowing?"

"I've just been thinking some bad shit," he said.

To which Gosling simply said, "Well, stop it for chrissake. Grab that oar and fucking pull on it."

You couldn't beat stripped down logic like that.

George started rowing.

2

"Jesus," Gosling said, "lookit this damn fog now."

Marx was standing up in the lifeboat, the mist so heavy he looked ghostly. "Shitting bad," he said. "It's like the peas without the soup."

The fog had come in now, *really* come in. Before it had only hinted at its arrival, but now it had come. It was easily as bad as it had been on the *Mara Corday* when they'd first entered its sucking, execrable depths. It was not a casual envelopment. The fog fell over them in winding sheets and moldering rugs, an immense and billowing fleece, encompassing them in its viscous, woolen gulfs which were moist and decayed-smelling like coffin linings. It was steaming and hazing and brewing like a dirty, greasy mantle of steam rising from a black and bubbling cauldron. It carried a briny, gray stench to it and it literally descended on the raft and lifeboat like a blizzard, like a sandstorm . . . blinding and dense and coveting.

George saw it come.

Saw it come rolling over the weeds and dank waters like a storm of ectoplasm, felt it find him and cover him. Find and cover them all, bury them in its fetid, leaden depths. Within seconds, he could barely see the men in the lifeboat just to his left. They were wrapped up in the stuff, frosted in it. Just grainy silhouettes working their oars and, at times, completely invisible through that hungry mist.

"Should we lay-to?" Marx said.

Gosling considered it. "What in the hell for? We're just in a pocket of this shit, we might as well row ourselves out."

Everyone was happy for his decision. The idea of waiting in fog that thick was unpleasant, unsettling somehow.

"These weeds are getting thicker than ever," Cushing said, scraping a glistening green tangle of them off his oar.

And they were. Maybe, in this heavier fog, they had lost their channel and maybe the channel was just simply gone in the profusion of the weeds. They floated in great, leafy masses, wet and rank, oozing tendrils of vapor. It looked like you could walk across them.

"Start pulling," Gosling said.

They did. The bow of the lifeboat slit through the weeds easily and the raft seemed to slide right over the top of them. But you could hear bushy thickets of seaweed brushing along the bottoms like scraping fingers. In some places, that weed was so thick it brushed along the sides, too.

Before it had been getting dark, those lurid moons coming out . . . and now? No, it was like day had returned again. The fog and everything else was lit with that glimmering, dirty illumination. Maybe it was the fog itself and maybe there was truly no day or night there.

"What the hell was that?" Cushing said.

Something had passed beneath the lifeboat, bumping its entire length. Marx told him, whatever it was, it wasn't trying to eat him so keep fucking rowing. They pressed on, making good time, George was thinking, moving along at a pretty good clip despite

the weed. From time to time, things bumped into the raft and boat, but they never saw what they were. But they were big things, some of them.

"Hold up," Marx suddenly said. "Look here what we got."

Just before the bow of the lifeboat there was what looked like an old plank, waterlogged and knitted with mildew. There were other scraps of wood in the weeds. Off the starboard side of the raft, George was seeing something long and green and fleshy.

Gosling prodded it with his oar. "It's . . . it's a log, part of a fallen tree. Something like a palm, I'd guess."

"Maybe we're near land," Chesbro said.

"Maybe."

The log was from no tree George had ever seen. It was pea-green and scaly, something very primordial-looking about it. Like a backyard weed grown to fantastic proportions.

"Looks like sort of a primitive cycad," Cushing said. "Sort of a prehistoric palm."

"And that's fine," Marx said. "As long as the prehistoric wildlife don't come with it."

They kept rowing, the fog enshrouding them, thick as ever. They continued to bump into things and most of the time, the fog hid them before they could get a good look. But from time to time they saw more logs and planks. Once, something like a bush torn from an Oriental garden. Chesbro said he saw what looked like a styrofoam cooler, but it was gone before they could all see it. Regardless, each man was given hope. Because they all knew that they were getting closer to something.

"Just don't be disappointed when you see it," Pollard said more than once.

It seemed they pulled through the weeds for hours and then came revelation of a sort. They bumped into something else, only this something was not moving. They thudded into it and stopped dead, everyone almost getting thrown forward.

"What in the hell now?" Gosling said.

They went forward, not knowing what it could be this time and, generally, expecting the worst. But what they saw was harmless, just immovable. To George it looked like the roof of a house jutting from the tangled weeds, the peak sticking up, but set with crusty marine deposits.

"It's a hull for chrissake," Marx said. "Goddamn shitting hull from a ship. She must have turned turtle here in the weeds."

They could see about fifteen or twenty feet of it, the rest was under water and weeds. George got a weak feeling in his belly looking at it, almost like he was getting some disturbing psychic vibe from the thing. But he supposed that wasn't surprising, for whatever had happened to the ship was probably a dark, depressing story and one that had taken lives.

They rowed around it, deeper into that grim cultivation of seaweed. Pausing only to clean off their oars from time to time. But every man was expectant now. The signs were there — planks and logs, the hulls of sunken ships — and they were getting optimistic. They felt it in their bones and blood, they were very close now to something.

And George was thinking, *I just hope it's something good. God knows we need something good-*

And those thoughts had barely exited his mind when they passed by some huge

and amorphous shape in the fog, something vague that disappeared into the mist before they could really get a good look at it. But they knew. They all knew.

"A ship," Gosling said. "I think it was a ship . . ."

And that stopped them from rowing, stopped them from doing just about anything. The ship had been off their port side, but now it was gone. The question was: Did they stop rowing and try to find it?

Which was pretty much what Gosling was thinking about when something happened that stopped him from thinking. Stopped them all from thinking or doing anything else — the fog began to lift.

It ran thin, then thinner, became diaphanous like something sheer and clingy. It began to unravel and unwind, casting aside motheaten rags and guazy wrappings and misting cerements. Disintegrating and pulling apart like moist blankets and ancient shrouds. Yes, like a stripper, the fog disrobed, tossing its dressings aside, and revealing the bare bones beneath. And that was pretty apt . . . for everywhere, bare bones.

Cushing said it before anyone else could: "The ship's graveyard. Jesus, it's the ship's graveyard . . ."

And they saw, they all saw.

The mist was still there, but it was more of a haze now. The weed stretched in every direction, a watery, seeping matted carpet of green tendrils and coiled leaves, stalks and bladders and rotting creepers snaking through it. It was green and yellow, tinted with flowering pink buds. And set in it like tombstones in viscid, crawling vegetation . . . wreckage. Keels and undersides, bows and bulwarks, bowsprits and spidery tangles of derricks latticed in marine growths and slimy bloated ivies which were pulling them down deeper into the weed itself. Here were shattered skiffs and gutted scows, the ribbed frameworks of schooners sunk in the weed on their sides. It was some endless, weedy junkyard of the sea, of dead ships stripped of meat and masts, crumbling skeletons encrusted in shells and barnacles and growing things. Dozens and dozens of them thrusting up from the verdant bed of weed.

There was so much of it, it literally took your breath away.

But it wasn't just sunken and dismembered ships, but nearly intact derelicts and hulks, some riding up high and others dipping down into that creeping green proliferation. This was the fabled graveyard of the seas, hundreds of ships held immobile in the fields of thick seaweed. Freighters and tankers, fishing vessels and yachts, tramp steamers and whalers. Some were recent additions, but some . . . old beyond old, barks and packets, clippers and 18th century brigantines. George saw a moldering, weed-infested relic laying low in the growth and black polluted water that could have been the worm-holed, riven cadaver of a Spanish treasure galleon.

Many were mastless and bilged, punched through with great cavities like torpedo holes. Caught by the weed, they were unable to sink completely, slowly deteriorating, their crews long dead, their superstructures atrophied to sagging beams and leaning uprights. Some of the old sailing vessels looked almost seaworthy, but most were listing badly to port or starboard, dead and decayed things looking for a grave.

These were the ships that caught the eyes and imaginations of the men in the raft and lifeboat. Not the modern iron ships, but those flaking mummies from centuries gone by: brigs and schooners, four-masters and square-riggers. Their sails had long ago

decomposed to dingy rags, but you could almost feel the history behind them, feel them riding high, creaking and groaning, shrouds snapping and flapping. But that had been long, long ago. For the weeds had claimed them now, held them in a green fist like cemetery dirt and would not let them go, would not let them seek the oblivion they deserved. No, the weed had ensnared them, grown up over their hulls, completely engulfing some so you could only see the general shape of a ship under all that growing, glistening, knotted weed. It sprouted from open portholes and roped over taffrails, noosed halyards and wreathed deckhouses.

But it wasn't just the weeds, for here in this steaming, stagnant swamp, fungi had settled thickly over topmasts and mizzens, meshing jibs and topgallants. It was born in the putrescent hothouse nurseries of the weed and grew up over the masts in snotty lacework and nets, filaments and oozing vines, festooning like cobwebs, drooping and hanging like Spanish moss.

Yes, so thick was the weed and creeping gray fungi, that it was hard to say where the seaweed gardens ended and the ships began. For most of those derelicts looked not like things made by man, but things fashioned by nature out of roping green and yellow growing things that were mockeries of man's work.

"Oh, my God," George said, feeling an exhilaration and a despondency he could not shake. "How long . . . how long has this been going on?"

Marx just stared. "How long have men been plying the sea, son?"

There, of course, were newer vessels, too. Sleek ferries and frigates with ice-cutter bows and radar beacons, satellite dishes and radio aerials. There was, in fact, few ships, few types that were not represented in either pieces or in whole.

"Have you ever seen anything like it?" Gosling said. "In all your born days?"

Cushing just shook his head. "No . . . but I was expecting it, I was expecting something like this. Weren't you all? Down deep, weren't you all?"

Cushing told them that this was the real Sargasso Sea, the real ship's graveyard, the great boneyard of the world's oceans . . . except it wasn't anywhere on earth as sailors had long thought, but here, here in this pestilent cellar. This dripping, miasmic, vaporous sea which was just about due south of nowhere.

"This is what they saw," Gosling said, excited now. "All those old stories you heard of the Sargasso, the ship's graveyard, the devil's graveyard . . . Jesus, just like you thought Cushing, this is it. It ain't just a story, it's real."

"Aye, that it is," Marx said. "Ships must have passed through here, saw all this, and passed back out to tell the story . . . maybe thinking the whole time they were stuck in the real Sargasso."

George liked none of it. He felt like a white man finding the fabled elephant's graveyard in Africa. He was seeing something that he was not supposed to see. No man was meant to see this and live to tell about it. Some things, he knew, were best left as folklore and twice-told tales.

There was a subtle current in the weed, not enough to touch those big ships, but enough to propel the lifeboat and raft deeper into that murky, misting swamp.

"I can understand the old sailing ships getting trapped in here," Marx said. "Becalmed, dead in the water . . . but those freighters and steamers, no, they could cut right through this shitting stuff."

“Maybe the weed’s thicker than it looks,” Cushing suggested. He dipped his oar down into that spongy, floating mass, could find no end to it. “It may go down for a mile for all we know.”

Gosling nodded. “Maybe. But even with big diesels or steam turbines, you’d run out of fuel sooner or later, wouldn’t you? And then what?”

“Then you’d drift,” Marx said.

“And be brought right back in here.”

They all thought about the hopelessness of it all, those hundreds of ships trapped here, fossils in some grim collection. They looked out over them. They looked eerie and haunted in the mist, backlit by whatever made the mist glow. Those twin moons had come out again, the huge red one casting a bloody glare over mastheads and yards, stacks and cargo booms.

Pollard was saying nothing. He did not look exactly surprised about any of it. Chesbro, however, looked downright scared.

“I don’t like this place,” he said. “It looks . . . it looks like a cemetery.”

And it did.

The cemetery of the seas. Only in this unhallowed sea, the cemetery was restless and uneasy, a loathsome necropolis of dead and drowned things, slimy things ribboned with weeds and crepuscular fungi. It vomited back up what it could not hold down in its black charnel belly: waterlogged tombs and mildewed caskets, wormy coffins and crumbling sepulchers, floating crypts and oblong boxes draped in floral tributes of rotting kelp and vaporous green shrouds. They rose from the noxious weed, in whole and in part, clustered with morbid shadows, leaning this way and that like ancient headstones and webby monuments. The ships here were mummies and husks, cadaverous hollow-eyed things made of pipes and bones and ossuary girders. Derelicts welded from yellowed femur and gray ulna, mildewed rungs of rib and stark meatless vertebrae. They were alien exoskeletons and spectral ghost ships, exhumed wraiths resurrected from moldering abyssal mortuaries.

Yes, just skeletons and things that wanted to be skeletons. Things that sought blackness and depths, sluicing vaults cut in muddy sea bottoms, bathypelagic catacombs of drifting sediment and burrowing marine graveworms.

Jesus, George was thinking, it’s like some fucking shrine.

But not a good one. Not one that inspired cherished memory or peace, but one that inspired an almost atavistic horror. A place of malignance and spiritual violation. They were all so alone here. So far from everything decent and warm and caring. All those ships, just dark and hollow and scratching with a secret darkness that was devouring them bone by bone.

George was seeing those ships and feeling them, too, swallowing great black silences and tenebrous echoes, feeling the memory of those ships fill him, drop his dreaming brain into some pit where he could hear voices. Yes, the voices of those lost souls who had perished aboard those ships or simply went mad. But they were all there, all those tormented voices shrieking at him, showing him dark truths that made him want to scream. He was at the bottom of a dripping, brine-stinking well, feeling them feel him, touch him, whisper and laugh and cry. They were many but one, a single withering presence, a monster of deranged mourning with ten thousand hands and fifty-thousand

steel fingers. George listened because he had no other choice. Just as Cook had channeled the last sensory impressions of Lieutenant Forbes aboard the *Cyclops,* George was channeling *them.* Knowing their thoughts and memories, their pain and sorrow and rage.

He saw all those great ships, all those three- and four-masters ghosting along beneath a pall of moonlight, slicing through high seas and thrashing water. Spars were creaking and blocks whining shrilly. Rain dripped from sail and rope and backstay. The masts and yards rode up high and cutting. Sails snapped and whistled. Hands hoisted and lowered cordage and shrouds. And the sea was a constant, a raging and rolling and pitching thing. Those sharp bows sliced through it and the seas broke before them like wheat before a scythe. He felt the coming of that cemetery fog. The stars blotting out, the breathable air sucking away, ship after ship after ship drawn into a misting tunnel of non-existence.

Ship's bells ringing.

Voices shouting.

Oh, please, oh, please, get us out of here, oh God above get us out of this awful place, Lord.

Please.

We're lost.

We're becalmed.

We're adrift.

We are dying.

We are losing our minds.

The fog is eating the flesh from our bones.

And the ships drifted on, enshrouded and doomed and despairing. Falling one by one into the weed and into rot, bathed in that slimy tideless sea, pulled into crawling depths and moist graveyards of weed where there were things with unseeing eyes and bloated tentacles and slavering mouths. And maybe, oh yes, something far worse that would come drifting from that misting effluvium, something vile and diseased and burning, smoking and sparking and vomiting ice.

And the voices screamed at the memory of that which walked alone.

The well vibrated and shuddered with their screaming, howling voices blown from contorted mouths fed by terror-wracked minds that were going to pulp and ash. And those ships, they became coffins. Lids snapping tight and weeds ringing them shut while white fingers scraped at satin and silk and-

"Jesus H. Christ, George," Gosling was saying. "You all right?"

They were all looking at him.

Gosling was shaking him.

And he realized his mouth was wide and his eyes bulging and he was screaming silently. But then it was gone and he was on the raft and there was nothing, nothing but a lot of derelict ships and a handful of men wanting to know what in the hell he was doing.

But he couldn't tell them. He could just say, "I'm . . . fine."

Nobody bought it, of course, and long after the other eyes had abandoned him, Pollard was watching him, knowing things he shouldn't know, but that was just the way of this place. It was the amplitude or something. For sensitive minds could hear things they had no business hearing and maybe Pollard had heard that scream of his though no

one else had.

And maybe they would have all questioned him over his little episode, but there were other and more important things to be considered.

"Look at that," Marx said. "Did you see it? Just at the edge of the mist there."

They saw it. Some huge, nebulous shape had passed beneath the weed or maybe through it, a colossal luminous form that dipped beneath the wreck of an old three-masted brig and vanished from site.

"What the hell was that?" Gosling said.

Maybe they wanted Cushing to give them some rational scientific explanation for it, but all he said was, "I don't know . . . but I hope to hell it doesn't come back."

3

"Hungry," Menhaus was saying. "I can't seem to remember what it is not to be hungry."

Saks thought that was funny. "Yeah, but look at yourself. You've already dropped pounds. You're looking good. Just imagine how good you're going to look after a month, two months, a year-"

"Okay, Saks," Cook said. "Once again, quit trying to piss people off."

"I'm kidding, for chrissake. In case you don't know what that is, Big Chief, it's also called a joke or a funny, a laugh. Boy, Cook, ever since you decided you were the big cheese, you're a real fucking pain in the ass."

Cook could only sigh.

In command? Oh Christ, of all things.

Command of what exactly? A lifeboat with four men who were ready to tear out each other's throats at the drop of a hat? Even Fabrini wasn't weathering any of it real good now. After what they'd seen and experienced on the *Cyclops,* something in him had shut down. What was left was irritable and angry and looking for something or someone to vent on. Cook had tried to draw him out more than once, but each time he did Saks was there, asking if he wanted to breastfeed Fabrini, too. Maybe wipe his ass and tuck him in to boot. And Cook had to wonder how long it was going to be before Saks and Fabrini *really* went at it, how long before their knives came out and blood was drawn. At least on the *Cyclops,* they'd settled down, had enough room to get away from each other.

Sure, Fabrini had been very good about it, when you considered things. Like the fact that Saks had cut off part of his ear with a knife. Most guys, they'd be wanting payback for that, but Fabrini let it go. That was big of him. But now? Well, Fabrini kept touching his bandaged ear and staring at Saks. It wasn't too hard to imagine what he was thinking.

And Saks knew it, too.

Cook had to watch them all the time.

And he pretty much had to do it alone because Menhaus was pretty much whiny and pouty twenty-four/seven now, withdrawn really, talking from time to time, but more to himself than anyone else.

And Crycek? Well, Crycek had his moments.

So, essentially, Cook was wading these dark waters alone. He had to keep them from each other, offer them hope, squelch Saks, reassure them that they were not going to starve to death or get eaten by horrors out of the mist. Then, if that wasn't enough, Cook had to keep directing them, giving them something to hold out for and this when he was dying inside, had considered more than once how easy it would have been to slit his own wrists.

"How do you like this fog, Crycek?" Saks said.

Saks had been asking him this question about every half an hour or so, needling him, trying to get under Crycek's skin . . . and pretty much trying to get everyone riled up. Because Cook knew that's what Saks was: a catalyst. That's how he saw himself. The more disorder he could create, the sooner Menhaus and maybe even Fabrini — God

forbid — would want him back in charge.

Crazy thing was, Cook had even considered handing back the reins to Saks. Wondering if maybe that arrogant, selfish piece of shit might have some ideas about what they should do that he would only share once he was firmly back in the driver's seat. But, ultimately, Cook had weighed it out like a man deciding whether or not to emasculate himself with a paring knife . . . and decided it wasn't exactly prudent.

"You hear me, you crazy shit?" Saks said. "How do you like this fog?"

Cook was ready to intercede, but Crycek turned and said, "Compared to what?"

Cook laughed.

Saks smiled, but he was seething beneath. Who was Crycek to smart off to him? To undermine the disorder he was sowing?

"Compared to Fabrini's hot ass on a cold night, you freak."

But that didn't get him anything. And you could almost hear the reels spinning in Saks's mind, hear him scratching that one off his big list of Things To Do. Hear his pencil scribbling up there: *Note to self, Crycek is impervious to gay cracks. Try a new approach. Maybe insult his mother or father, talk about banging his kid sister.*

Cook was watching the curtain of fog ringing them in. It was thick as woolpack now and you could barely see three feet to either side. For a while there, it had gotten dim and those mystic, eldritch moons had come out . . . Crycek nearly coming out of his skin at the sight of them. But then the fog had blown in or seeped in, and things had gotten lighter out again. Though it seemed like it was thinking about getting dark again, it just couldn't make up its mind. Things were dimmer, yes, but they could still see each other fine and Cook was almost praying for darkness so he wouldn't have to see their faces for awhile. The disappointment in them. The way they had been ravaged and lined by terror.

The weeds were very thick. Much thicker than earlier which told Cook they were getting closer to the heart of the seaweed sea. From time to time, he had his little crew row, but that never lasted because Menhaus would complain about his back and Saks would call him a pussy and Fabrini would tell them both to shut up and Crycek would start getting gloomy, asking Cook just what their hurry was. What was waiting out there for them was endlessly patient.

Damn. What a bunch.

"Hey, Crycek," Saks said. "What's your view on cannibalism?"

"Oh, knock it the hell off, Saks," Fabrini said. "You're really getting on my fucking nerves."

Saks giggled. He looked satisfied. Well, maybe he couldn't torment Crycek much, but he could still push Fabrini's buttons just fine. He seemed happy with that.

"No, I'm serious, Fagbrini. I think we should all just sit down and discuss this. We may drift like this for weeks . . . in another month, we'll be out of food and water. What then? I mean, we have to be practical, don't you think? We have to decide who's going on the spit. And when that times comes . . . what're we gonna do? Flip a coin? Draw straws? Or just decide who's most expendable?"

Fabrini was breathing real hard, veins pulsing at his temples. "I'm telling you, Cook, shut that prick up or I will."

"Shit, Fabrini, settle down," Saks chuckled. "You're scaring the piss out of me over here."

"Knock it off, Saks," Cook said. "Or we'll *all* throw your ass into the drink."

"Yeah," Menhaus piped in. "Quit being such an asshole."

Saks chuckled again. "Listen, Menhaus, a man has to go with his strengths." Dammit, it never ended.

Nobody had come off the *Cyclops* in real great shape. They were all haunted after that. Those monsters in the sea and fog . . . well, they were terrible things, but you could fight them and they were not intelligent. But that spider-woman on the *Cyclops* . . . well, she was an entirely different bag of chips, now wasn't she? Even now, nearly a day since they'd fled from that mausoleum, Cook was having trouble putting any of it into context. For, really, what in the hell had Lydia Stoddard become? A ghost? A mutant? A crawling and skittering representation of the raw and shivering insanity that had peeled the skin from the *Cyclops* and everyone on board? Was she a physical manifestation or something supernatural? Jesus, it all boggled the mind and wilted the soul. But the very scary thing about it all . . . or *scariest* might have been apt, because it had all been scary and withering . . . was that whatever that woman had become, it was intelligent. It could plot and scheme and lure men to insanity and death. And as far as Cook was concerned, you could not fight something like that. Something that was equal parts madness, ectoplasm, and nightmare biology driven by a predatory, deranged mind.

No, none of them had been unscathed by the implications of that business. Even Saks, Cook figured, had had his stomach ripped out by it. He might not show it, but if you looked real close, you could see it in his eyes: fear.

"Now listen," Saks said. "I don't want to alarm you dipfucks, but food is something we have to be concerned about. Eventually, we're going to run out . . . then what? What happens then? What happens if one of us starts getting crazy ideas?"

"You already got that covered," Crycek said under his breath.

"Yeah, well I wouldn't talk, psycho." Saks held his hands out before him to show that there was nothing up his sleeve. "This is something we have to think about. You guys are all hungry and I know it. This goddamn rabbit food Cook has been doling out isn't keeping our bellies full."

He had Menhaus' full attention now. You could see it in his eyes, that caloric lust. Here was a guy intimately familiar with buffets and second helpings. Maybe his belly was shrinking, but his eyes were filled with an unflinching desire to sink his teeth into something.

"All right, Saks, that's enough," Cook said, once again the only voice of reason. "We're all hungry. I'd love a cheeseburger or an order of prime rib, but there aren't any restaurants out here that I can see. So just shut up about it. And as far as cannibalism goes . . . I'll shoot anyone who even mentions it again." He had everyone's attention then and his eyes were flat and dark and menacing. "And you better believe that I mean it."

Even Saks wasn't smiling then. No, he had a new game now. Which was really old and just plain worn out through repetition. You saw it every day in prison yards and factories, boardrooms and barrooms . . . *the stare.* Any place men were gathered, you saw *the stare.* The intimidation game. My dick is bigger than yours and my muscles are harder than yours, don't you look at me 'cause I can kick your ass any goddamn time and you better believe it. You don't intimidate *me,* I intimidate *you.* Yeah, it was childish and self-defeating, the last resort of weak minds. The sort of thing that should have been left in the

high school locker room along with your dirty jock. But men never left it there. Cook knew they didn't. Men were essentially weak, frightened creatures scurrying through life, seeing just about anything and everything as a challenge to what swung between their legs. Great stuff. You could see monkeys and lions practicing it on TV and men practicing it just about everywhere else.

And as Cook knew, the only men who practiced intimidation were those that were intimidated.

"Okay, Saks, you can quit staring me down now," he said. "The playground is closed and I don't play the big dick game."

Fabrini burst out laughing and even Menhaus did.

"You might wanna watch it with that, Cook," was all Saks could say. He had been cornered now, his infantile macho games dragged out into the open for all to see.

"Yeah, okay, Saks." Cook smiled. "And Saks?"

Saks looked at him, never seemed to stop.

"Grow the fuck up already."

Saks was boiling and Fabrini was laughing at him.

Poor old Saks, Cook thought, *he never even realized that all his life, people were laughing behind his back.*

"What's that shit on your arm?" Menhaus asked.

Saks looked at him. Gave him *the stare,* too. "What the hell are you talking about, mama's boy?"

But Cook was seeing it, too. All over his forearm . . . things like sores, great spreading red sores that did not look so much like abrasions or scrapes but like ulcers.

Saks pulled his sleeve down. "Nothing," he said. "It's nothing."

"You better let me look at it, Saks. Doesn't look good at all. Fabrini? Grab me the medical kit."

But Saks said, "Keep away from me, Cook! All of you just fucking keep away from me! Be a cold day in hell I'd let a cock-monkey like you dress my wounds."

"Then dress 'em yourself."

"Mind your own goddamn business."

Cook folded his arms, shaking his head. "C'mon, Saks, you're talking to the Big Cheese here. The health and well-being of all of you is part of the Big Cheese's job."

Saks recoiled a bit when Cook moved toward him and Cook stopped. Saks's eyes had gone feral and simmering. He looked suddenly like he was capable of just about anything.

"If that shit's catchy, Saks, you're going over the fucking side," Fabrini said.

And the thing was, even with the brief look at it Cook had had, those ulcerations *did* look catchy. There was something unpleasant and unnatural about them like skin tumors. Something morbid.

"You just try, Fagbrini."

Saks shifted and they were all watching him, ringing him in now like wild dogs and he was feeling it, too, feeling cornered and threatened. A guy who liked to be the center of attention, but not prey. His hand inched towards the knife in his belt and Cook knew he'd cut anyone that got close.

Fabrini got a little closer. "What is that? Between your legs . . ."

Saks recovered now. “That’s my dick, and, no, I’m not putting it into your mouth.”

But it wasn’t his dick they were all looking at. There was a little greasy flannel sack that he had hidden under his leg. And now everyone saw it.

“Okay, Saks, what is it?” Cook put to him.

Saks grinned, knew they had him. He was caught in their snare with nowhere to run. He did two things real fast right then: he brought out his knife and picked up his little flannel-wrapped package that was about the size of a fist. “It’s mine and you fucks don’t get any.”

Cook said, “Saks-”

“Fuck you, too, Big Chief.”

He unwrapped it and it held something pale and fleshy marbled with pinkish-brown lines. Salt pork. They could smell its saltiness and meatiness in the air and everyone began to drool almost immediately. And Saks was loving it. He brought it up and licked it.

“Where’d you get that?” Menhaus said, slavering like a dog now.

“You cheap, selfish sonofabitch,” Fabrini said.

Crycek just blinked his eyes rapidly.

Cook shook his head. “He got that off the *Cyclops.”*

Everyone stopped salivating about then. To them, the idea of eating anything off that hoodoo ship was akin to stuffing your mouth with worms. They wanted meat and fat . . . but they weren’t ready to go that far.

Cook said, “Saks, Jesus Christ, don’t eat that stuff . . . you don’t know what kind of germs got into it. That shit is almost a hundred years old.”

Fabrini was looking sick, like maybe Saks was licking a piece of carrion.

Cook didn’t like this at all. The salt pork had an odd grayish cast to it.

Saks wouldn’t let them near it even if they wanted some. “It was in a sealed cask, you knothead, it’s just fine.”

“You mean you’ve been *eating it?”* Cook said.

“Sure, just like this.” Saks took a bite out of it and then another.

“Jesus, Saks! Don’t!” Cook cried out.

But he was powerless to stop him. Saks ate the entire wedge of salt pork and seemed to enjoy every bite. When he was finished, he licked his lips.

“How much, Saks . . . how much did you eat?”

But Saks just smiled.

“Let him poison himself,” Fabrini said. “Who gives a shit?”

Cook was watching him and thinking about those sores on his arm. Maybe there was no connection. Maybe it meant absolutely nothing and maybe it meant everything.

After that, nobody said a thing, but they were all thinking plenty.

The lifeboat drifted through that bunched, leafy weed and into the perpetual mist that floated over it in tarps and sheets. There were occasional sounds out there . . . splashings, but they never saw a thing. Not until they rammed into something.

“What the hell?” Fabrini said.

Crycek was in the bow. “It’s . . . shit, I think it’s a boat.”

Then everyone was up there, trying to pull the boat alongside. It was another

lifeboat, a dead ringer for their own. Crycek tried to read the stenciled letters on her bow, but there were weeds everywhere. Somehow, some way, those profuse and winding weeds had climbed right up into the lifeboat, filled it like a window box. But they could still easily make out its general shape and bright orange fiberglass hull.

"How'd all those weeds get in there?" Fabrini wanted to know and you could hear something cracking just under his voice like ice.

Cook was up there, too, now.

He and Crycek were trying to bring the lifeboat around, but it was knotted and braided with creeping weed, just way too much of it and they were all painfully aware of that fact.

So much weed . . . had it grown in there? Cook pulled and the lifeboat would only move a few feet before it reached the end of its leash. The weeds were lush and bountiful and fibrous, tangled and snaking like the roots of an old banyan tree. You would have needed a chainsaw to free that lifeboat. As Cook and Crycek pulled, their own boat swung around until it was next to it lengthwise . . . or as close as those verdant weeds would allow.

Cook leaned over and Crycek did, too, while Fabrini and Menhaus held the lifeboat so it would not snap back from the elasticity of the weeds that held it.

Using their knifes, they began cutting through all those creepers and rootlets, tendrils that were thick as fingers and strong as cable. There was a dank heat coming off those weeds, heavy and steaming and sickening to smell. They were set with small, greasy leaves and damp fans, bulbous little floats and thorny stalks. Cook was certain more than once, that he felt them move in his hands . . . but it must have just been gravity. He took his knife . . . a knife he'd liberated from the *Cyclops* . . . and hacked and cut and sheared away green, glistening stems and hot-feeling vines.

"These things . . . they're moving," Crycek said, pulling his hands away.

Fabrini said something, but Cook wasn't listening. Yes, they were moving, but very slowly, sluggishly. They were actually pulsing like newborn things, hot and vibrant, unpleasantly fleshy to the touch.

Cook found a bloated tuber that just struck him as wrong. It was pink like a vein, throbbing beneath his fingers and it disgusted him. Plants could not *feel* like this. They could not be like this. He slashed his knife against it and a dark, inky fluid sprayed against the back of his hand.

Fabrini swallowed something thick in his throat. "It looks like . . ."

"Blood," Cook said. "It's . . . I think it's blood . . ."

Maybe it was the others' unwillingness to help him hack through those pulsing vines and tentacles of green and pink growth and maybe it was just his instinctive hatred for them, but Cook began to slash and cut his way deeper into the mass and soon wished he hadn't.

There was a body under the weeds.

The body of a man, probably a crewmember from the *Mara Corday* . . . but it was really hard to tell. He was lying in the bottom of the boat in about two inches of slopping black water, noosed in garlands of pulsing weed. His face was sharp and bony, sallow and lifeless, his body terribly wrinkled and shrunken. And he was breathing. Shallowly, but breathing all the same.

“He’s alive,” Cook said.

But the others wanted no part of this. There was something diabolic and utterly macabre about a man entwined in all those stalks and tubers and pink tentacles. Cook started pulling the weeds away from him . . . and recoiled as a single distended and oily run of weed came away from the man’s throat with a popping sound like suction cups pulled from vinyl. There were oval sucker marks on his neck. Yes, the weeds had encircled him, tucked him down deep in their own vegetable profusion and-

“They’re . . . they’re sucking his blood,” Menhaus said in a high voice, just absolutely filled with an irrational horror at the idea of it. “Those fucking weeds . . . *they’re sucking his blood away . . . ”*

And there was no arguing against it.

For that’s what those weeds were doing. The pulsing pink tendrils had suckers on their undersides like little rubbery mouths. They felt like viscid arteries in Cook’s hands. The man beneath them was slowly being leeched, he was being bled white drop by drop by drop.

Cook looked down at his hands and they were red with blood.

Something like a dry, rasping scream came from his mouth. He fell back into the lifeboat and the other one pulled back into the mist and they all distinctly heard the sounds coming from it. Busy, stealthy sounds. Rustlings and slitherings as if the lifeboat were filled with serpents. But it wasn’t serpents, it was something far worse.

Cook hung over the gunnel, washing the blood off his hands manicly.

“Unclean,” Crycek said in a hurting voice. “Oh, so terrible and unclean . . .”

4

"That ain't no boat," Marx was saying, squinting through the thickening mist. "Not sure what the hell it is."

Thing was, nobody was sure. Just another vague gray shape licked by tongues of fog, murky and indistinct. Large, like a ship, but splayed out and low in the weed. Gosling's idea was, with night apparently coming on, to find a ship they could rest on. Not the haunted skeleton of some old fungus-shrouded sailing vessel, but something more recent. A bulk carrier or container ship, something he was intimately familiar with. Something that would have fresh water in her tanks and possibly real food in the pantry. But whatever they were seeing at the edge of the fog, it had everyone's curiosity up.

"Maybe we don't want to know what it is," Pollard said.

That got a quick affirmative from Chesbro, who was only interested in finding shelter and food, nothing more.

"Oh, shut your mouth," Marx said.

So, they rowed deeper into the ship's graveyard and the mist settled over them like a canopy, obscuring everything and making all those old dead hulks look incorporeal and ethereal. They rowed around shattered bows and masts dripping with weed and belts of fungus. The seaweed was so very thick they could barely move through some of it. Huge banks of it rose above the water and even that which was at the waterline or just submerged, was tangled and ropy, ensnarling oars and the bow of the lifeboat. The raft took it easier, sliding over the stuff except where it grew in great islands of steaming vegetation.

The farther they got into the graveyard, the thicker the stuff was . . . and the more ships were captured in it. Some riding on top of it and some on their sides sinking into it . . . or somewhere in-between. They passed overturned hulls crusted with sea shells and the mastless wreck of a racing yacht and once, they saw something like the prow of a Viking dragonboat jutting up, but it was so blanketed in that engulfing sea grass that it could have been just about anything.

The closer they got to the mysterious object, the more certain they were it was no boat, no ship. They came around the side of a fishing trawler, its high derricks and winches rising above them in the fog like Medieval gallows, and then they got a good look at it.

"It's a plane," Cushing said. "A goddamn plane."

And it was. It was a dusky green in color, easily over a hundred feet in length, just laying there in a great reef of weeds like a toy plane in a bed of peat moss. It had high-mounted wings with turboprops and an upswept finned tail section. The weeds had not begun to grow over it yet.

"That's a Hercules," Marx said. "A C-130. Transport plane . . . Army and Navy use 'em, all the services do. The old workhorse of the military."

"What's it doing here?" George said.

But they just ignored him, awed by this huge bird that had fallen from the sky and died in the seaweed sea. It was a stupid question anyway and he knew it. It got there the same way everything else did . . . it was pulled in. They had only seen two other planes so

far. One was a little Piper Cub immersed in trailing weeds and the other was just the wing of some unknown craft rising from the waterlogged vegetation like the dorsal of a shark, slicked green with mildew.

"Hasn't been here too long by the looks of it," Cushing said. He shook his head. "Makes you wonder how many ships and planes the military loses in this damned place."

"Yeah, and how many they really admit to," Marx said.

George could imagine what it must have been like for that big, proud plane. Getting sucked into this place, instruments gone haywire, the crew going out of their minds circling in the grim fog until they had to ditch. He wondered what had become of them . . . or what had gotten to them.

As they got in closer, they could see that the cargo bay doors in the massive tail were open, the aft loading ramp down, pressed into the weed. And maybe they were all thinking the same thing: a fresh transport plane beat the shit out of an old freighter any day.

They rowed in as close as they could get, which was about thirty or forty feet. At which point the weeds became so thick the lifeboat was stopped dead. They all climbed into the raft, cutting the lifeboat free and tying it off with a length of nylon line which George fed out loop by loop as they pushed the raft in closer to the boarding ramp. When they got there, Marx hopped out, securing the raft with the line from its sea anchor. Gosling helped George tie off the line to the lifeboat and they went inside.

It was dark in there.

Gosling broke out the two flashlights they had and everyone went in. It smelled damp and musty inside, but it was great to be walking again. To feel a firm surface beneath their feet. The interior of the C-130 was immense. You could have packed a hundred men comfortably in the cargo bay. There was a row of a dozen pallets to one side, each stacked up to a height of eight feet, and, to the other side, two Hum-V reconnaissance vehicles with more pallets in front of them. All of which were secured with trusses and stanchions to the floor. There was a walkway in between.

"Now, if we just had some land to go for a spin," George said.

"I wonder where all this stuff was going," Cushing said.

"Middle East or Europe, probably," Gosling said.

Marx climbed up atop one of the Hummers, played his flashlight along a heavy gun mounted on top. "This would be a fifty-caliber machine gun, boys. If we just had some ammo for it, we could cut anything in half out there with it."

Up front of the vehicles, there was an open space with web seats on either wall. There was some loose gear stored there in green nylon canvas bags. Gosling checked them out one after the other. "Medical gear," he said. "We can use this stuff . . . antibiotics, pressure bandages, disinfectants. Must have been some medics on board . . ."

They found a few battery-powered lanterns and used them, conserving their flashlights. Marx and Gosling kept checking everything out.

"I don't see any survival rafts here, First," Marx said. "My guess is these boys ditched and headed off across the weed."

They moved forward up to the cockpit and it was empty, save for a lot of avionics and navigational systems which were beyond them. Many of the screens were still lit which meant the batteries still had a charge. Marx turned on the VHF and scanned the

channels, picking up nothing but that breathing, listening static. He turned it off before they heard something worse.

George and Cushing stepped down to the passenger door just behind the cockpit. It was open, too, weeds and water having insinuated themselves there now. It was getting dim out in the seaweed sea, the fog hanging in a ghostly membrane, flowing and covering, shimmering like burning marsh gas, will-o'-the-wisp. Great patches of it drifted over the weeds and assorted wreckage.

But maybe ten feet out in the weeds was what they were looking at.

Snagged in green mats of the stuff were the remains of three bodies, possibly a fourth. You couldn't see much of them, just slats of white bone showing through greasy emerald and yellow-green ropes and flaps of creeping weed. Though the others were face-down, sinking in the growth, one of the skulls was grinning up at them, tendrils of pinkish slime oozing from its eye sockets and seaweed on the crown dangling like hair. Down there, in that misty growth, that skeleton looked like it wanted to get at them.

"Oh, boy," George said. "That must be the crew . . . or some of them . . ."

A fat brown worm slid from the skull's nasal cavity and sought the weed.

"They're just dead. They can't hurt you," Gosling said, leading the both of them away.

But George was thinking that it had already hurt him, seeing those men stripped to bone like that had hurt him in ways he could not begin to catalog. But that was the reality of this place: one wound on top of another. One heartbreak and nightmare after another. You could expect no more here in this feral dimension.

Like gravity, it sucked.

5

Cook thought: *Look at them, just sitting and waiting, hoping. They all have something to return to. Lives. Things they want and need to take up again. All except me. I was alone in the old world and I'm alone in the new one. And they know it, they all goddamn well know it. They talk about girlfriends and wives, sisters and brothers and children. Me? I say nothing. They want to get back. And look at their eyes, will ya? They all doubt that I'm the man that can get them there.*

Cook could feel it all draining out of him now. All the poison, all the doubts and uncertainties and anxieties. It came out of every pore and nearly drowned him, left him gulping for air up in the bow. He sat there, staring off into the mist and the weeds, not wanting any of them to see the weakness on his face. He was wrung out and just plain out of answers. All of this had gone on too long and these men were going to die and it would be his fault, all his fault, because he didn't have a goddamn clue as to what to do next.

No, he couldn't let Saks see it on his face.

Because Saks *would* see it. And if he saw it, he would recognize it. Because guys like Saks are predators and they can smell fear and personal anguish same way a mad dog can smell panic on you. And once that happens, forget it, it's only a matter of waiting for those teeth and that frothy, hot breath. And that's exactly how Saks was: he smelled it on you, he tasted it on you, he sensed it on you, he'd sink his teeth in and never let go. You had any flaws or frailties and Saks got hold of them, he'd exploit the shit right out of them. He'd rub it all in your face until you either killed him or just simply broke down and he won.

And if he won . . . look out.

Cook wasn't exactly sure when it had started coming apart for him. Maybe it had been coming on for a long time and maybe what they'd found in the other lifeboat had just kicked it into high gear. Because he was having trouble with that, having trouble with what he'd seen.

Blood. Those weeds had been full of blood. They'd been milking the poor bastard lying in the bottom. He was unconscious and beyond pain, but what if he was paralyzed or something? What if he had known what was happening, but could do nothing to prevent it? Was just too weak? Jesus, how long could the mind string itself together when parasitic weeds were sucking the blood out of you?

And I left him there, Cook thought, just angry and guilty and full of wild, self-defeating things he could not name. *I left that poor bastard there . . . to be drained to a husk . . .*

What kind of death was that? By the look of the guy, he'd probably already lost too much blood. Even if they cut him loose, he would never wake up. Cook tried to tell himself that, but it did not make him feel better. Because the least he could have done was to have killed the guy. Put a bullet in his head or drawn a knife across his throat . . . *something.*

But he hadn't.

He hadn't done a damn thing.

When he'd sliced through those damn weeds . . . and they'd bled, squirted hot

blood over his hands . . . well, it had just been too much. And when he'd pulled those little suckers off the guy's throat, that's when things had snapped for him. The grim and shocking realization that those plants fed on blood, were designed by nature to leech things . . . it was just too much.

Even now, he could still feel the greasy flesh of those plants, the blood on his hands.

Saks was watching him.

Cook did not turn, did not have to. He could feel that hungry gaze on him, those probing eyes. Oh, yes, he could feel them just fine. Searching for a sign of weakness, something to take advantage of, to use and abuse.

Cook, feeling a raw heat in his belly, turned around and sure enough Saks was giving him the eye, that cocky grin on his face.

"What the hell are you looking at?"

That grin, growing, knowing it was on to something here. "What's the matter, Cook? You seem a little touchy? Something eating you?"

"What could be eating me, Saks?"

"I don't know, but something is. Playing the big boss man too much for you?"

Cook felt his lower lip tremble. "It's too much for anyone, isn't it?"

"Poor Cook. He just bit off more than he could chew." That grin was so big now it was like a knife cut in Saks's face. "Some guys just aren't up to it, Cook. Some guys just don't have it. And you, my friend, you don't have it."

"Well, maybe not, Saks, but who else is there?"

Saks shrugged. "Let me think. How about you, Fabrini? You ready to take charge here?"

Fabrini just looked from him to Cook dumbly, an almost bovine emptiness in his eyes. "No . . . no, I don't want no part of it."

Saks shrugged again. "Well, there's always Menhaus. He's a true pillar of fucking strength. And Crycek? Sure, maybe a crazy situation needs a crazy leader."

Crycek ignored him.

Cook tried to control his breathing, felt like he was about to start hyperventilating. "Which leaves *who?* You, Saks? You?" Cook started laughing. "Saks, no offense, but putting you in charge is like putting a child molester in charge of a little boy's school."

"Fuck you mean by that?"

"I mean, you're a goddamn zero. I mean you don't have the guts for the job. Yeah, I've been watching you, Saks, and when the shit gets deep, you're the first to run. All you care about is your own skin. You can play tough all you want, you can run those fucking intimidation games of yours until the cows come home, but it won't change the fact . . . you're weak. Inside, you're soft and gutless and spineless and-"

"You shut your goddamn mouth!" Saks cried out, his voice echoing out through the fog.

Ah, now who was pushing whose buttons?

"Take it easy, Saks," Cook said, feeling calm now. "We all know it, we all know you aren't fit to run a fucking hot dog stand. But you know what? It always amazes me how gutless, stupid fucks like you always end up in charge. Just blows me away. But, you know what they say, shit always floats to the top."

Well, there it was.

Saks's invitation to take up his knife, lunge and cut. And he'd probably make a good show of it before Cook put a bullet in him.

Saks just sat there, eyes narrowed and filled with hate. But that's all he really did. He sat there and stewed and made with the hard eyes. All bluster and blow, no thunder to go with it.

Fabrini chuckled. "Boy, you pegged old Saksy, Cook. You sure as hell did. Anybody smell something? I think Saks just shit his pants."

Saks had his knife out then.

Maybe he could take it from Cook, but not Fabrini. No way. Not ever. He brought that knife out and his eyes went black and Fabrini brought his out and here it came, all those boiling black poisons were finally being lanced and Menhaus and Crycek weren't about to get in the way and, the thing was, neither was Cook.

Not this time.

He had murder on his mind. As they said, it only took one rotten apple to ruin the bunch and Saks was rotten, all right. Just dirty and dark and seething to his core like something that needed to be cut out before it infected the whole body. So Cook was not going to intervene, he was going to let Fabrini kill him and if he didn't, Cook was going to. Because he couldn't go on day after day in this nightmare world with that asshole picking at everyone.

"Go ahead, Fabrini," Cook said, his voice low and even. "Kill that useless fucking prick. You've got my blessing."

That made Fabrini smile.

Something like doubt crossed Saks's face. See, this wasn't how it worked. Cook was the voice of reason and he was supposed to stop this, get in the middle of them, cool heads prevailing and all that. But Cook wanted it to happen. Really *wanted* it and that was the last thing old tough guy Saks expected. He was no stranger to violence. He did not back down easily . . . particularly when the odds were in his favor. He had been in knife fights before, but what he wasn't liking was that Fabrini was young and strong and muscular. Had been pushed too far now and was beyond all the societal taboos ingrained in him that had stopped him before. He was capable of murder now and Saks knew it.

Fabrini was on his feet, the lifeboat rocking.

Saks stood up, knowing it was coming now.

"Bring it on, you faggot," he said.

And Fabrini started to move, down low and stalking, knowing he had physical advantages here. Maybe Saks was experienced at this sort of thing, but he was pushing sixty, going to fat, and his glory days on the docks and construction gangs were far behind him now.

"What's that?" Menhaus said. "Over there . . . what the hell is that?"

Saks did not look, but the others did. Fabrini included.

There was something there. Something that looked pretty much like a large patch of weed that had broken loose and was drifting . . . drifting right toward the lifeboat.

"Weeds," Cook said. "Weeds."

But even as the words fell from his lips, he wasn't so sure. Weeds? No, this did not look like a harmless patch of weeds, in fact, Cook was thinking it looked like . . .

well, it looked like a head of hair just beneath the surface. That was crazy bullshit, but that's what he thought momentarily. Like the gargantuan head of a woman, her hair fanning out in every direction. If it was just weeds, then it was *different* weeds. For these were not the average creepers and stalks, leafy branches like kelp that made up the weed banks. No these hairs or tendrils or whatever in the Christ they were, were fine, were wire-thin and as that patch got closer to the boat, Cook was thinking that they looked much like waterlogged pasta, thin and reedy and pale.

"Put those blades away," Menhaus suddenly said.

He was soft and friendly, your favorite uncle or brother-in-law. A good neighbor or a guy to drink beers with or cookout in the backyard, bowl with . . . but he had no real balls and they all knew it. So when he barked out an order in that I'm-taking-absolutely-no-shit tone of voice, it was uncharacteristic and everyone listened.

Now Saks was watching that submerged shape moving at the lifeboat, too, and there was absolutely no doubt in anyone's mind: it was not accidental, that thing was moving at them on purpose.

"Get ready for the shit," Saks said.

Sure, and that's exactly what everyone was doing . . . except, they did not know exactly how to get ready for this. At sea, in a normal body of water, you saw a shark or a jellyfish or sea snake moving in your direction, your mind had some ready ideas because it knew what these things were and what they were capable of. There were certain evasive maneuvers you could attempt. But what about this . . . *thing?* How could you prepare for something that looked like nothing you'd ever seen?

Cook was watching it.

It was circling around the boat and seemed to be moving in the general direction of the bow now, where he was. It was brushing aside clumps of weeds and there was no doubt it was a solid object. But looking at it, you wouldn't have thought so. It had come up out of the water maybe two or three inches now, just enough so that it broke the surface of that algae-scummed sea. What Cook was seeing was an irregular, somewhat oval hump that seemed to be made of those wiry strands of material. They were yellow and green in color, incredibly thick and profuse and tangled like discolored angel's hair. They radiated out from that shaggy hump in twisting filaments that were snarled and matted in places, others free flowing and incredibly long.

"What is it, Cook?" Menhaus said. "What does it want?"

And Cook was thinking that what it wanted would not be a good thing . . . for this thing inspired a shivering primal disgust in him like seeing a spider under a microscope, a bulbous body covered with fine hairs. Something so alien and abhorrent it could not truly be alive. He watched the thing, seeing that it had no eyes . . . just those wire-thin projections cast about in the water from that hump. As he looked upon it, those cilia-like hairs seeming to twitch and writhe in the water, he saw his own death. It came on him suddenly and with complete conviction, this thing was death. It was *his* death, the same death that had been dogging him for thirty-eight years. It was here now and it was ready.

Cook saw this and knew it to be true and the knowledge of that was like a razor scraped across his brain. It was painful and destructive and emptying. He had an odd, almost hallucinogenic sense that something inside him wanted very badly to rip through his skin and escape. He couldn't seem to breathe and he could feel his heartbeat slowing,

as if preparing for the inevitable.

"I don't like this, Cook," Saks was saying. "Shoot that fucker . . ."

And they were all telling him to and he figured they were right, but then he also knew that this new and mystical certainty which had bloomed in him like a death-orchid was simply beyond them. It was not their time.

"Cook . . ." Fabrini began.

The thing began to rise up before the bow . . . and, Jesus, what was it? It came up out of that stinking, vile sea, dripping water and slime and clots of decomposing matter, plumes of steam rising from it. It came up ten or twelve feet, viscid and alive and utterly impossible.

Menhaus gasped.

It had a nebulous, abstract sort of shape, something made of bumps and mounds all threaded with those tendrils of hair, matted and knotted and sweeping and moving. It was a flowing thing and a braided thing, a diaphanous spider clustered in hairballs and filigree. A snaking expanse of living cobwebs that were in constant, creeping motion. That hump they'd first seen rode atop the mass like a head, but it had no face, no anything . . . just a net of that webby hair hiding something black and glistening beyond. And it had two limbs or maybe three . . . boneless things that were not tentacles or the appendages of a crab, but just long and scaly sticks that shuddered and dripped ooze.

In a high, panicked voice, Saks said: "What . . . what are you going to do about it, Big Chief?"

Good question.

Cook looked upon it and it was hideous, an abomination, something that could not possibly be alive . . . but was. Very much alive. A creeping, evil mesh of fibers and hairs and dirty gray lace. Strands and plaits of those growths were extended out in a random pattern like limbs, but they were not limbs. Just free-flowing and wavering hairs, others bunched into great masses and knotted strands, all interconnected by long fleshy cords.

Cook started shooting.

He emptied the gun into it and then it took him. That is to say those long and scaly limbs knocked him into its central mass. But it had no mouth as such, nothing to rend him with. He fell against it and they all heard him scream, scream with the guttural and blank and inhuman sound of an animal being tortured to death.

Menhaus was pounding on his seat, screeching and shouting and crying, his mind flying apart in his head.

And Fabrini, he was just in shock.

Cook . . . Jesus. All those hairs and cilia were blanketing him, webbing and caressing and sliding over him, knotting him up and he was thrashing, tearing at those growths, coming out with handfuls of them that sounded like bunches of grass pulled from muddy soil. All those webs inherited him, coveted him, flowing up his nostrils and down his throat and in through his eyes, crawling and undulating things like the dendrites and synapses of nerve cells. They were growing *into* him like roots, into him and out of him.

They all saw it.

About the time his screaming stopped because his throat was filled with a bail of those slithering cobwebs, tiny hairs began to sprout from his face and throat and hands

and arms. They burst forth like rootlets on time-lapse photographs, wiry and fibrous, just millions of them erupting from Cook until there was no longer any Cook . . . just a hairy, twitching thing with the general shape of a man that was being absorbed into the thing's rustling mass.

The others sat there because there wasn't a goddamn thing they could do about it. Fabrini stood up once, brandishing an oar and took maybe one step before Saks told him to sit the hell down, he knew what was good for him.

It happened very fast.

One moment Cook was there and the next . . . he was part of the thing.

Menhaus was whimpering and Fabrini was making a strangled gagging sound in his throat and Crycek refused to look upon it. And Saks? He was scared shitless and wanted to put a gun in his mouth and blow his brains out through the top of his head. But as terrible and offensive as this all was, that scheming mind of his took it all for what it really was: opportunity.

So, he reached down inside himself, found his voice quivering in darkness, and pulled it up his throat and past his lips. "Okay," he said in a squeaking voice. "Okay . . . just sit still and do not fucking move."

It was an easy order to follow; nobody had a problem with it.

The thing was still there, a huge and breathing network of webbing and tissue and floss, all those fibroid and ropy sinews shuddering and wriggling like long stringy worms. It looked almost pregnant with the mounded form of Cook tangled in it. Its limbs, those branching scaly sticks, were busy there, pulling nets of hair over him, tucking him away, a cocooned fly. And the really horrible thing was, Cook was still moving. Shuddering and jerking in there, trying to die and having a hard time of it apparently.

The men in the lifeboat knew what was happening to him.

They knew he was not being eaten exactly or drained of blood or de-boned . . . although, essentially, all these things were happening, just not in the way they understood them. For Cook was being absorbed and digested by those hairs, dissolved and assimilated into the general mass of that nightmare. The creature was the sort of thing you whacked with a broom and swept into a dustbin, except in this place, it did the whacking.

It was moving now, lilting slowly from side to side like it was drunk. Saks saw this and figured it probably wasn't a good thing. For if the beast was full, it would have just sank back into the sea.

It brought those limbs forward, resting them on the gunnels of the lifeboat and all those wiry gossamer tendrils began to twist and curl and spread out like when it had first seen . . . or sensed . . . Cook. A surging, rustling growth of them flowed from the thing and covered the bow, filling the boat now, seeking new flesh to subvert.

And Saks found himself thinking that those hairs were not just a body covering, but possibly general appendages and sensory instruments to boot . . . muscle fibers and nerve fibers, organs of taste and smell and digestion.

Menhaus tried to climb overboard and Saks clapped him on the ear. "Give me one of those kerosene lamps and a flare," he said very quietly as those hairs crept steadily forward, just a moving mat of them creeping in their direction, covering the bow seat and progressing, progressing, a tidal wave of surging, living hairs.

Fabrini put one of the lamps in Saks's hands and Saks shattered it against one of

the amidships seats, scant feet from those tendrils, and splashed kerosene over the advancing horde. He capped the flare and a bright red tongue of flame lit up the boat and reflected off the fog like neon. The creature did not know fire. It could not see as such, but Saks was willing to bet it had nerve endings. He tossed the flare at those kerosene-drenched fibers and they exploded with a gush of flames, catching like tinder, spreading up toward the thing's body.

It began to thrash wildly, cheated out of easy pickings, and it had a mouth or something like one, for it began making a high, strident *e-e-e-e-e-e-e* sort of sound like a dying insect, the sort of sound you expected a spider to make as you crushed it to pulp under your shoe. It withdrew, flaming and smoking, filling the air with a nauseating, acrid stench.

It sank back into the sea, sizzling and steaming.

But it did not go away. Its hump was still visible just above the waterline.

"What now?" Menhaus said. "Oh, Jesus, what now?"

"Put that fire out," Saks said.

Fabrini and Crycek splashed water on the dying flames in the boat and Menhaus grabbed the flare which was burning a trench in the hull of the lifeboat.

The hump began to move, vibrating and shaking, rising up now maybe three or four inches out of the water. It began to elongate and then there were suddenly two humps and they began to pull apart with a tearing, moist sound.

"Oh, what the fuck is it doing?" Fabrini said.

Crycek licked his lips. "I think . . . I think it's dividing."

And it was. Binary fission, asexual reproduction. Like a protozoan, it was splitting itself into two parts. The humps continued to move apart, both vibrating madly, strands of pink and yellow tissue connecting the halves as genetic material was shared and the cellular plasma membrane was sheared and reformed. Coils of white fluid like semen filled the sea around it. And then division was complete and there were two humps out there. Neither were moving.

Menhaus vomited over the side of the boat.

Crycek said, "It might be dormant now . . . we better get out of here while we can."

Saks thought it was a good idea. He passed out the oars. "Now row, you sonsofbitches," he told them. "Row like motherfuckers . . ."

6

It had been threatening for hours and now darkness came.

It was born in the stark depths and the black silent bellies of the derelict ships. It came rushing out in a plexus of shadows, shifting and pooling and spreading, connecting finally in a blanketing ebon sheet that fell over the ship's graveyard until even the fog was consumed. The only hint of light being that dirty, reddish haze from the larger of the moons overhead.

"And how long, I wonder, will it last?" Cushing said to George.

They were standing on the boarding ramp with one of the battery-powered lanterns while Marx and Gosling went through the crates, calling out what they were finding. So far, they had found blankets and tools, three crates of boots, two of desert-camouflage tents. And about two dozen boxes of MREs, Meals, Ready-to-Eat, in military jargon. The replacement for the old C-rations. So they had a new food source. And probably enough to last them for months and months.

Gosling had a crowbar and Marx had a roofer's hatchet-hammer for splitting crate ends. Both supplied by the U.S. Army loadmaster who had supervised the loading of the plane.

"Lookee here," Marx said. "Satchel charges . . . pre-packaged, too. Set the fuse, toss one, and *boom!* These could come in handy, you know what I mean."

They did.

George had used charges like that when he was in an Army engineer battalion. Had used them a lot more for blasting at construction sites. Packed with C-4, you could do some serious damage, you were of the mind to.

Chesbro and Pollard were up in front of the Hummers, sitting in the web seats. Chesbro was praying and Pollard was just staring off into space.

"Who can say what sort of orbit this place is in?" Cushing continued. "Night might be a few hours or a few weeks. Who knows?"

"Shit," George said.

The fog was bad enough, but to be in complete darkness that long . . . well, he doubted that they'd all be sane by the time it lifted.

He tried to distance himself from it all. He kept thinking of Lisa and Jacob and how much they meant to him. Even the things he'd once dreaded seemed reassuring now. Jacob's dental bills. Lisa's chiropractor bills. The two ex-wifes and the alimony. The mortgage. Christ, it all sounded so good now. So comforting and safe. It was funny what the thought of impending death and madness could do to a person.

It could just change your outlook on everything.

"We can live like shitting kings," Marx said, overjoyed at all the goodies they were finding. "Look here . . . flares! Now don't that beat it dead with a stick?"

Gosling said, "We'll never get all this stuff into the boats without sinking them."

"We'll just take what we need, come back again if we need to."

"Yeah," Gosling said. "If we can find this damn plane again."

"Oh, but I got faith in you, First. Even here in the Devil's own asshole, I got lots of faith in you."

Gosling laughed and Marx launched into some dirty story about three nuns and a leper whose dick kept falling off.

George looked out into the mist. It was thick and roiling and lacey beyond the boarding ramp, something woven out of smoke and steam. The light from the battery lamp made it maybe ten feet before giving up the ghost. "What keeps you going?" George asked Cushing. "I mean, what keeps you sane here? Me? I've got a wife and a kid back in the world. I know I have to get back to them, one way or another. Every time I feel like I can't do this anymore, that my mind is coming apart on me . . . I think of them. I think of how it's gonna be to see them again. It gives me something to hold onto. But what about you? You're not married, are you?"

Cushing shook his head. "I told myself I wouldn't get married until I was forty and then when I turned forty, I told myself fifty sounded good."

"Fifty's soon enough," Marx said behind them, balancing his hatchet-hammer on one muscular shoulder. "Christ, I was married six frigging times. Six. And all of 'em meat-eaters and ball-collectors. Don't be in no hurry, Cushing, to lacquer your balls and put 'em in a glass case with a DO NOT FUCKING DISTURB sign on 'em. You get married, only time she'll let you see your balls is when it's time to dust 'em off. Oh, I speak from experience. My last wife, Lucinda . . . holy Jesus Christ, you had to see this one. She could de-nut the best. Even when we divorced, evil bitch only gave me one of 'em back. I think she ate the other. She was special, that Lucinda. A week with her was like ten years hardtime. Her mouth was so big you could've slapped a sewer cover on it. Yeah, she was some kind of ball-buster, all right. Girl like that made a man want to suck dick and hang curtains and walk funny. Just the sight of her made my pecker go soft and my wrists get limp."

"So why the hell did you marry her?" Gosling asked.

Marx winked at him. "Oh, because I loved her, First. Loved her dearly."

The talk moved on to Marx's other wives, all of whom sounded like growling, long-toothed things that had slipped out of the House of Carnivores at the zoo. Marx said his second wife was so pissing mean, he used to wear body armor to bed and carry a whip and a chair to tea.

"You want to know what it is for me, George?" Cushing said, now that Marx was on to the snakepit of his third marriage. "What keeps me going? Curiosity."

"Curiosity?"

Cushing nodded. "That and nothing more. I don't really have much back home, unless you want to count my golddigging sister who married Franklin Fisk who got us all into this mess. But what I do have is curiosity, see? For natural history and biology and living things. I like folklore and general history, philosophy and literature. A lot of highbrow crap like that. And this place? Shit, it's awful, but I'm seeing things few men have ever seen. Ever lived to tell about. All those ships out there . . . you know what they are? Mysteries. The kind of things people write about and make movies and documentaries about. Things people will never really explain, all those vanished ships and planes. But we have the answers to all those riddles. We know what happened and I think that's kind of a gift, don't you?"

George didn't think that at all, but he nodded. "We'll die smart, anyway."

He was listening to Marx extol the virtues of his fourth wife who apparently was

some kind of cannibal who sharpened her teeth with a file and had razor blades shoved up her wahoo.

Cushing cocked his head to the side. “You hear that?”

George thought he had heard something, too. He just wasn’t sure what. But now he was hearing it again: a stealthy, sliding sound. It came and then went. “What is it?” Gosling said to them.

But neither of them could say and now Marx had fallen silent, too. The night was pressing down, misty and moist and clotted. The cargo bay of the C-130 made everything echo. They could hear water dripping and Chesbro mumbling prayers. Then . . . then something else. That sliding sound again. To George, it sounded oddly like somebody was dragging ropes over the outer shell of the cargo bay. But he wasn’t thinking ropes. He wasn’t sure what he was thinking. Only that to him, it was not a harmless sound, but an evil sound full of menace and danger.

Marx had joined them now. “What in the Christ?” he said.

And then, just beyond the lip of the loading ramp, the sea suddenly lit up with a grim and ghostly phosphorescence that spread out for what seemed hundreds of feet. It lit up the fog and made the weeds go luminous. Just some eerie incandescence coming from beneath the water and weeds themselves.

And then it faded and the darkness swam back in.

“Get away from that door,” Gosling said.

They could hear that stealthy rustling again, something — many of them, in fact — brushing against the outside of the cargo bay.

George and Cushing backed away, but Marx was not moving.

Gosling dropped his crowbar, came around the side of the Hummer in front. It was facing outward and he clicked on its headlights, two pillars of light stabbing through the darkness and fog. But there was nothing out there, nothing at all. Just the fog swirling about, the glistening expanse of weeds.

Then there was a splashing sound like something heavy had fallen back into the sea followed by a squeaking sound like a finger drawn over glass.

But what had caused it, no one could say.

They were all watching the fog out there in the Hummer’s headlights. It was thick and boiling and damp. There was another of those rustling sounds and then a tentacle came sliding out of the mist. It emerged with a sort of scraping, scuttling sound like some fleshy, blind caterpillar looking for a juicy leaf. It crept up the boarding ramp, looking almost curious. A slimy and undulating thing about the width of a pencil at the tip and bigger around than a man’s waist where it disappeared into the weedy depths. It was bright red with pebbly flesh and obscenely bloated, stout and powerful and flexing with muscle.

It carried a sharp, gagging stink of ammonia about it.

“Jesus lovely Christ,” Gosling said.

Marx was stepping back now, too.

The tentacle had not come up into the cargo bay as yet, it was busy searching around on the ramp itself like an investigative worm, like it knew something appealing was there . . . or had been.

Sure, George found himself thinking, *us.*

It coiled about on the boarding ramp, fat and full. Its beaded red flesh was the color of boiled lobsters and beneath, they saw, were triple rows of dun yellow suckers, puckering and expanding, a brown chitinous hook like a cat's claw emerging from each one. These are what made the scraping sounds.

"Squid," Marx said. "Big, shitting squid. Saw this big mother floating off the Canaries once, it-"

But he never finished that, for the tentacle shuddered and froze-up like maybe it had heard him, it twisted up upon itself, exposing those puckering suckers and hooks, and then slid back off into the fog. And you could almost feel the relief spread through the men, but it was short-lived. Very short-lived.

Two more tentacles came out of the mist. Then a third and a fourth and a fifth. They came out fast, sliding up the boarding ramp like blood-red pythons searching for something to constrict. Marx barely got out of their way and he didn't get out of the way of the sixth and seventh. They darted out of the mist like rattlesnakes striking, one corkscrewing around his waist and the other looping around his left arm.

It happened just that fast.

So fast, in fact, that everyone managed to gasp and that was about it. Those tentacles found him like they knew exactly where he was, like they could see him. There was no hesitation. They came out of the fog and wrapped him up and with such force, all Marx had time to do was utter a low grunting, *ummfff* as if he had been kicked in the stomach, the wind knocked right out of him. The hatchet-hammer fell from his fingers about the same time and clattered to floor of the cargo bay.

"Oh my God," Gosling said, simply surprised.

Those tentacles twined him up like a fireman's hose, tightening and squeezing and Marx screamed, a high and shrieking sound of primal agony. And then like a vise, those vibrant red tentacles crushed him with immense strength. You could actually see their alien musculature flex and contract like a clenching hand. Marx's eyes bulged and his face went a vibrant red, just as red as those tentacles, then purple and finally black. The tentacle around his waist had squeezed his midsection to the thickness of a forearm and you could hear bones snapping and things pulping to sauce inside him. He looked like a livid water balloon a child had squeezed in its fist . . . his torso and head, legs and hips swelled-up to the point of bursting from internal hydrostatic pressure. He gagged out foam and blood in snotty tangles and something bleeding and fleshy which might have been his stomach or intestines.

He looked like a deep-sea fish that had undergone fast, massive decompression.

And this happened in the span of about five seconds.

Five seconds that passed with disturbing, hallucinogenic clarity for the men that witnessed them.

George screamed and fell on his ass.

Gosling came running, shouting and screeching, the crowbar magically in his hands again and he made it right to the bloody, smashed hulk of Marx just as those tentacles gave him a final squeeze to make sure the fight was taken out of him. A gout of blood and tissue vomited from Marx's distorted mouth and splashed across the front of Gosling's shirt, but it didn't even slow him down. He came on swinging, hammering the crowbar into two slimy tentacles that sought him out. They recoiled instantly and were

replaced by two others that did not recoil.

Marx's corpse was upended and yanked out into the mist with such force that his head struck the loading ramp, his bloody scalp peeling free.

George was on his feet by then.

Or was for a moment or two. As he got up, a tentacle swung out for Gosling and he ducked under it and it hit George in the chest, hit him like a railroad tie. Knocked him up and against the wall of the cargo bay and he slumped over, barely avoiding another which snaked back around in a question mark, seeking his head.

Dazed, confused, the wind kicked out of him, George saw another tentacle coming at him, coiling and slimy and evil, and all he could think was what it was going to feel like when those hooks sank in him and those muscles squeezed his insides to paste.

"Look out, George!" someone cried. "Oh, Jesus, look out . . ."

7

Cushing heard that voice cry out and saw that tentacle squirming in George's direction and he reacted without thinking.

He grabbed George by the ankle — that slick tentacle passing so close to his face that he could smell the stink of the rotting sea bottom on it — and dragged him over near the Hummer. And did it fast, that tentacle coming back around like scythe, looking for something to squeeze. At any other time, he knew, he would have had to grab George's legs in both hands and then done a lot of puffing and struggling . . . but at that moment, his adrenaline was amped so high, he just grabbed that one ankle and yanked George away like he was stuffed with dry hay.

As he turned, he saw something that nearly drove him insane.

Just a momentary glimpse, but it was sheer poison. Fifty or sixty feet away, the mist parted momentarily to give him a view of something that curdled him straight to the marrow. Spotlighted in the Hummer's headlights, he saw Marx's corpse being fed into a gargantuan puckered mouth the size of a train tunnel. Saw that tentacle stuff Marx's remains in there like a tasty treat. Into that gigantic chewing hole that was filled with a corkscrewing series of flabby tongues that peeled him down to a skeleton in seconds.

Then the mist closed in, covered the atrocity of that mouth and Cushing saw something like a huge yellow eye big as a wagon wheel looking right at him. Then it was invisible, too.

Three more tentacles swooped in out of the mist with a surprising, violent speed. One of them knocked Gosling on his ass and another entwined his ankle and still another brushed across his chest, those glistening hooks ripping open the front of his shirt and his chest with it.

"Get back!" he screeched to the men, *his* men, his voice raw with pain. He thrashed and panted and howled. *"Get back oh Jesus get back-"*

Cushing jumped forward, dodging under and around whipping, angry tentacles, picked up Marx's hatchet-hammer and swung it with everything he had at another tentacle reaching for Gosling. The blade split open that greasy, beaded red flesh and a spray of brown blood broke against his face with a burning sensation.

The tentacle which had been dragging Gosling off jerked as Cushing chopped into the other one. It jerked violently and unclenched, tossing Gosling through the air. He slammed into the front of the Hummer, collapsing over George. His ankle where the squid had him was eaten right down to the bone.

George was dragging him off then, mumbling and whimpering under his breath and Chesbro and Pollard had been finally shocked out of their stupor. They came forward, helping George pull Gosling back into the plane, beyond the Hummers.

Cushing dodged and ducked and made it to the Hummer. One searching tentacle tripped him, but he made it out of its reach and then the shit really started to rain down. For that grotesque monster squid knew there was food in the shell of that plane and it intended on having it.

More of those tentacles came in through the cargo door. And not just two or three, but a dozen, two dozen, filling the door with a squirming, seeking multitude of boneless

arms that were draped with seaweed, many bigger around than dock pilings and concrete pillars. They flowed through the door like a mutiny of red, bloated worms, those suckers pulsing open and close, the tearing hooks scratching along the metal floor seeking flesh to rend.

And Cushing thought: *This is no squid, this is no fucking cuttlefish, I don't know what sort of blasphemy it is, but it can't be real, something like this cannot be alive . . .*

The tentacles were not just inside, but outside, too.

They were rustling and slithering over the outer hull with a rubbery, squeaking sound, those hooks scratching away over the metal shell like thousands of nails.

Then the plane began to shake.

The squid had seized it, was hugging it in a crushing embrace. The metal shell groaned and squealed with metal fatigue. Rivets popped like bullets, ricocheting off the floors and walls. Cushing was thrown down face-first, then rolled under one of the Hummers. Then the plane shifted again and he was tossed back up against the crates.

There were so many tentacles invading the cargo bay now, you could not see the night and mist beyond. They were just as thick and knotted as tree roots in a drainpipe. Writhing and convoluting things, a fleshy, living helix of ruby-red ropes.

Then there was a flash of blinding light and Cushing had to cover his eyes in shock.

But it was just the squid. Its flesh was studded with millions of tiny photophores like that of a luminous deep-sea fish and without warning, it had lit them all at once. Cushing had an image burned onto his retina of dozens of stout and coiling tentacles glowing just as bright as Christmas bulbs.

He was up near the Hummer in the rear now, hanging onto its bumper as those tentacles surged deeper into the cargo bay, wriggling and scratching madly like snakes in a bag. And that's when he saw another and different sort of tentacle slide into view. This one was smooth like oiled rubber and ended in a concave sort of club that looked very much like the trap of a Venus fly-catcher. It was roughly the size and shape of a sixteen-foot canoe, tapping its way along like a searching finger. Then it rose up like a cobra spreading its hood until it was perfectly vertical, the upper tip brushing the roof of the cargo bay.

Cushing knew he screamed.

He thought he might have pissed himself, too.

The club was toothed with jagged spines all along its perimeter that were long and sharp enough to gut a man. The underside was fleshed in bubble-gum pink skin that was bumpy like chicken flesh. And as Cushing watched, that pink skin retracted, opened like the petals of an orchid with a whining sound like a punctured aerosol can and beneath . . . beneath was something like a huge, vagina-shaped mouth oozing tears of clear bile. A mouth set with dozens of black teeth that rasped together like cutlery. Surrounding them was a ring of red golfball-sized nodules that looked very much like eyes.

The mouth hissed at him.

But that's all Cushing saw.

All he could bear to see.

He began crawling rapidly deeper into the plane as it shook and trembled and groaned, more rivets popping. Getting constricted by those other tentacles would have

been bad enough . . . just ask Marx . . . but that obscene, toothy club was somehow worse. Cushing could almost feel it taking him, biting into him like the leaf of a man-eating plant, watching his agony with that circle of cruel red eyes. He was certain in his mad flight that the squid would crush the plane like an empty beer can and drag it down into those black, gelatinous depths.

All he could hear was the constant pounding thunder of those tentacles crawling and slithering in the cargo bay and the ones outside, sliding and scraping against the outer hull like a thousand windy tree branches rasping against the siding of a house. And amplified to the point that he could not hear anything else, just those tentacles in his head, moving and skating over the metal shell, animated vines and creepers and pulpy ribbons. It was the sort of sound that made something shrink inside him, offended and disgusted him the same way a million maggots boiling on the carcass of a road-killed dog would . . . all that twitching, slinking obscene life, it repulsed the human mind to its very depths.

Made you want to do anything before the sight and sound of that busy, fleshy profusion ripped your mind wide open.

The specialized tentacle with the club had retreated now.

The others had no intention. They found the first Hummer and spiraled around it, encircling it and deciding it was something they wanted. With a great rending snap, the Hummer was torn from its metal bracings and shorings and dragged out into the mist. The tentacles dropped it into the seaweed sea, where it went down in an explosion of air bubbles, then rose straight up like a steeple, lights pointed skyward. It began to sink again, but not quickly enough. More tentacles found it and pulled it under, its lights still working, strobing beneath the weeds and winking out, one after the other.

And then the squid sank away with it.

All those tentacles withdrew, leaving a slime of jellied emulsion behind them like mucus. The cargo bay was glistening with it, as if the gelatin from a canned ham had been sprayed around in there. And through it all, the battery lantern they'd hung just inside the mouth of the bay was surprisingly still out there, still working. But the only thing it was illuminating now were the snarled weeds and plumes of rising mist.

Nothing else.

George and the others had brought Gosling back into the plane as far as they could, up near the cockpit door. They had lit another battery lantern. Cushing was with them now, breathing hard and hearing the roar of blood rushing in his head. He was just beside himself, feeling like he was going to throw up one minute and go out cold the next. His face felt hot and cold and tingly.

Gosling was laying there, under a waterproof tarp. With shaking hands George was bandaging him as best as he could. Gosling was unconscious, moaning in his stupor.

"It's gone," Chesbro said. "It's gone now, it's really gone."

"It'll be back," Pollard said.

Chesbro clutched his head in his hands, saying: "'Behold now behemoth . . . he maketh the deep to boil like a pot . . .'"

George stopped what he was doing and turned to Chesbro. "You fucking idiot," he said, feeling it all coming out of him now. "You fucking stupid piece of shit."

Chesbro looked up at him just in time to see George's clenched fist coming at him like a piston, something propelled and deadly like a torpedo. It caught him square in the

mouth, snapping his head back and mashing his lips against his teeth. Had George any more room to swing, any more space with which to build momentum, he would have probably busted out a few teeth. But as it was, he split Chesbro's lower lip wide open and slammed his head against the cockpit door with a hollow clang. Then George's other fist was coming, but it was wild and just managed to clip the top of Chesbro's head as he curled up like a hedgehog in a defensive position.

By then Cushing was on George, pushing him back. "Enough," he said. "Jesus Christ, that's enough, George."

But maybe from where George was sitting, it wasn't. His teeth were clenched and his mind had gone stupid with hatred. The color drained from his face and he took a deep breath, his body going limp. "That fucking idiot . . . spouting that shit, spouting that shit at a time like this."

Pollard just stared at it all dumbfounded.

Chesbro was whimpering now, something in him just shearing open at this latest indignity. He was hugging himself, rocking back and forth on his ass while his mouth filled with blood and it trickled down his chin.

"Just take it easy now, everyone," Cushing said. He pulled a bandage out of one of the green nylon medical bags and made Chesbro press it to his mouth until the bleeding stopped.

Then he took a good look at Gosling. A real good look.

The bandages George had wrapped around his ankle were already turning red, same for the ones at his chest. Cushing was hardly a medic, but he'd been through a couple Red Cross first aid classes when he'd worked at a foundry years back. He searched through the Army medical bag. It had just about everything you could imagine, most of it centered around treating battlefield wounds. He saw the suture sets and given the enormity of Gosling's wounds, he knew a good medic would be thinking of stitching him up. But Cushing didn't know the first thing about suturing and now wasn't a good time to learn, he figured.

He removed the bandages at Gosling's chest and poured some QuikClot, clotting powder, into the deeper ones. Then he took out a pre-loaded syringe of what the label told him was triple antibiotic and injected it right into one of the gashes from the squid's claws, hoping he was doing this right. Then he placed self-adhesive fast-clotting bandages over the wounds and repeated it all at Gosling's ankle. But he wasn't too hopeful with the latter. The tissue damage was so severe, he doubted anything less than a modern medical team would be able to fix it.

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" George asked him.

Rubbing his trembling fingers against his legs, Cushing said, "Some of it from first aid courses, the rest I winged."

If nothing else, the clotting agents and bandages stopped the bleeding or slowed it to an acceptable rate.

"Let me take a look at your mouth, Chesbro," Cushing said.

But he just shook his head.

Cushing told Pollard to keep an eye on Gosling and George and he slipped up behind the remaining Hummer. From the light thrown by the lantern, they could see that the nylon line they'd tied off the lifeboat and raft with had been snapped.

"Oh, shit," George said. "If that raft is gone . . ."

And Cushing understood the implications of that just fine: marooned. Without the raft or lifeboat, they were marooned. Trapped in the steel coffin of the C-130 and like candy in a dish, the monster-squid would keep coming back until said dish was empty.

"I wish this goddamn night would end," George said.

"We just have to hang on."

George said, "If I can get at those satchel charges, we can take care of that ugly bastard."

"No," Cushing said. "You go back there . . . no, you'd be exposing your ass to that thing."

Pollard came walking up. "I think . . . I think the First is coming around." He looked out into the mist. "That thing . . . it can't get us way in the back, can it?"

"No," George told him.

But it was a lie and they all knew it. Cushing had gotten the only real good look at the thing out of any of them. And from the dimensions he'd seen, however briefly, he knew the squid was at least a couple hundred feet in length, maybe more. The tentacles themselves, he figured, were probably well over a hundred feet long. What they'd seen were just the ends. If the squid wanted, it could easily crush the plane or root around in there until it got all of them. Cushing was certain of this. Those tentacles would find them even in the cockpit.

"Look," George said. "Jesus Christ, *look . . ."*

The weeds and mist were glowing again, which meant the squid was still there, still waiting. There was a gentle, rolling splash and a tentacle slid out of the sea and up the loading ramp, uncurling as it came on. It was one of the specialized tentacles with the convex, hooded club at the end. The club was very smooth and shiny, reflecting the glare of the battery lamp hanging above. Cushing figured it was six or seven feet at its widest point and probably nearer twenty feet in length than sixteen as he'd originally thought. The tentacle it was hooked to, was smooth and suckerless, big around as a centuried oak where it vanished in the weeds.

George made an involuntary gagging sound. "What the fuck is that?" he said.

But Cushing was beyond words.

The club rose up vertically as before at the edge of the cargo bay, revealing its pink, moist underside and the barbed spines gleaming at its perimeter. That pink flesh shriveled back from that immense concave mouth and black gnashing teeth. They all saw that circle of red orbs and were all certain they were watching eyes. Pink slime was dripping from the mouth, dropping in clots to the ramp.

"Don't move," Cushing told them, locked down hard inside like January ice.

Nobody did.

They just stood there, peering around the Hummer.

It was an insane, nightmarish scenario. The club moved up into the cargo bay inch by terrible inch. Once inside, the tentacle itself paused, but the club turned slightly to the left and then to the right like the head of a man looking or listening for something. Cushing had a sudden, unsettling memory of watching the movie, *War of the Worlds,* as a boy. That part where the couple are trapped in the farmhouse with the Martian war machine hovering outside and the sensory probe that looked like a Martian head came

sliding in through the shattered window, trying to locate them. This was very much like that, for he had no doubt whatsoever that this club was *looking* for them.

No, no, not looking, but *sensing,* it occurred to him. It can't see. Those things look like eyes, but they're not eyes, not really. More like the eyespots around the bell of a jellyfish . . . looking very much like eyes, but actually light-sensing ocelli. Except in this case, maybe not light-sensing at all, but possibly heat-sensing like the pit organ of a desert rattlesnake.

It was sheer speculation on his part, a wild leap of logic at best based on what he understood of sensory physiology, but it sounded about right.

Yet, it was hard not to believe those orbs weren't eyes. When that hooded club swept around, they glittered like jewels, like something with awareness and intelligence behind them.

Cushing was wondering if maybe that monstrous cephalopod and its attendant tentacles might just leave, figuring the food source in the plane had made its escape. But he would never know because Pollard was getting antsy. He was shaking like a man with a tropical fever, sweat rolling down his face in rivers.

"I can't do this," he said under his breath. "I can't do this . . ."

And then he moved, turned and ran back towards the cockpit. The club jerked back suddenly like a startled cobra and that mouth hissed in alarm. It had sensed Pollard's whereabouts now, whether through motion or heat or maybe both. And the sea beyond the ramp began to boil and the mist began to blow around as dozens of tentacles came pouring out of the weeds and up the ramp, coiling and looping like serpents from a snake charmer's basket.

George and Cushing ran back to join the others.

Ran back and looked at those sweating faces and shocked, glassy eyes that were expecting to hear what their plan was. Hear about their defense or escape route, except George and Cushing didn't have one. Because this was it. This was endgame.

The beast knew where they were and now it was coming for them.

George saw the first of the tentacles slide over the roof of the Hummer, three more slide under it and emerge with a swimming, serpentine side-to-side motion.

"Into the cockpit," Cushing said. "Right now."

George and Pollard lifted up Gosling and started carrying him through the door.

Chesbro was just pale and paralyzed.

"Move, goddamn you!" Cushing said, the stink of the beast bathing them. When Chesbro didn't, he slapped him across the face. "Now, you dumb shit, unless you want your Behemoth to find you."

That got Chesbro moving.

He leaped through the cockpit door and Cushing wondered, as the tentacles came worming and slithering forward, wondered how long that flimsy steel door was going to protect them.

And maybe he would have kept wondering it except he saw an eruption of light outside, from somewhere in the mist. A flickering, orange-yellow light like that of a bonfire. Whatever it was, the tentacles and their master became aware of it, too. They froze on the floor, in midair, hanging from the ceiling by their suckers. They began to quiver like a cat watching a bird. More of that flickering light and very close now.

Fire.

It was fire.

Out here . . . but how?

A tongue of flame brushed up against the plane, throwing a greasy, churning light that jumped and flashed. Gosling, looking down towards the passenger door saw the flames quite clearly. The weeds were on fire. And either they had ignited themselves or someone had done it for them.

"What the hell is it?" someone in the cockpit said.

And Cushing was wondering just that when a shadow cut through the flames outside the passenger door. A shadow hunched and jumped through the doorway. Cushing fell backward through the cockpit hatch, expecting the very worst.

But what he saw was a human being.

A human being with a pail of something in one hand and a burning flare in the other. They tossed the bucket at the tentacles and threw the flare. Flames erupted in a gushing, spreading cloud and the tentacles retreated instantly like worms on a hotplate. They disappeared in a column of funneling smoke.

And it was then that Cushing got a look at their savior.

It was a woman.

8

They saw it.

They all saw it, if only for a moment or two. Something sticking up out of the weed. Something circular, disc-shaped, and very large. It wasn't a boat and it wasn't a plane . . . at least not of the world they came from. There was a word for what it might have been, but nobody dared say it out loud. They saw it for just a few fleeting seconds, then it was lost again in the fog. Thankfully.

"What do you think it was, Fabrini?"

Saks said this to him, not really expecting a reply anymore than he would expect one from a pet beagle. Because he figured that, intellectually, Fabrini was on the same level as your common ball-licking, shit-on-the-carpet, drink-from-the-fucking-toilet beagle. On a good day, that was. Most days, you could play fetch-the-goddamn-stick all afternoon with that boy and he still wouldn't get it. Sit there, wagging his tail and waiting for you to tell him what he should be doing and what he should be thinking about it all.

At least, this is how Saks was seeing things.

His crew of misfits and ass-fuckers, as he liked to call them, were his pets now that Cook was in hairball-heaven. Old Al Saks was holding that leash and you got out of line, he'd whack you in the nose with a rolled-up Chicago *Trib* or rub your pink, wet little nose in your own shit, see if he didn't.

Fabrini kept swallowing, looking around in the mist for a door that said EXIT and not finding one. "I don't know, I don't know what it was."

"You hear that, Menhaus? He don't know what it was. Fagbrini, you're a goddamn moron, you know that?"

Ah, here we go.

Fabrini was filling up with that hatred that was just as dark as bootblack and just as searing as hot oil. His hand was going for that knife in his belt, because maybe he was thinking that this was it. This was the time he punched Saks's ticket and Cook wasn't there to talk reason and the other two — Menhaus and Crycek — were out of their heads more often than not and could have cared less if Fabrini killed that bullying, foul-mouthed sonofabitch.

Just as long as he did.

Saks sighed, really bored with it all. "Go ahead, Fabrini, pull that fucking blade," he said, not bothering with his own knife. "Come over here and kill my ass. Personally, I don't believe a neutered she-bitch like you is up to the job. But, go ahead, prove me wrong. Bring it on, you cheap ass-licker. Come on, I want to see this."

Fabrini had his knife out, was never aware even for a moment that his buttons were being pushed and he was being manipulated by a master puppeteer.

He came on.

"Boy," Menhaus said, "you two are starting to bore the piss out of me."

Crycek said nothing, didn't seem to realize any of it was happening.

"C'mon already, Fagbrini, kill me," Saks said. "I'll have the last laugh and you know it. Because when I'm gone, it's going to be funny as all hell watching the three of you trying to survive out here."

That slowed Fabrini. Stopped him, even.

You could see the doubt creeping over his face in the light of their final lantern. You could see the indecision. And finally, yes, you could hear that hot bag of air in his belly leaking.

"Go ahead," Menhaus said, his eyes bloodshot and fixed, a crazy look about him like a guy on a three-day caffeine binge watching the WWF and wanting blood, wanting violence. "Slice the bastard! Nobody's gonna stop you. Nobody's gonna give a high, randy shit. You'll be doing us all a favor shutting that goddamn mouth of his."

Saks chuckled. "Sure, Fabrini, do what Fat-Boy says."

Fabrini didn't know what to do. Looked like he was ready to start chasing his own tail.

"Well?" Saks said. "No, I didn't think so. Because without me, you three are dead as Menhaus' dick and you know it."

Fabrini put the knife away and took his seat up in the bow again. Saks had finally broken him and he knew it. He needed Saks. They all needed that macho, trash-talking asshole and it was a hell of a thing to have to admit to yourself. Like saying you needed a pushpin in your left nut or a needle through your tongue. It hurt about that much.

But it was true.

"Okay, then," Saks said, happy now. "Since we've all come to the conclusion that none of you donkeyfucks could find your own wee peckers without rubbing your crotches with rock salt and seeing what turns red, let's get down to business, shall we?"

Fabrini wasn't liking it, but he listened.

"Now, I'm in charge here whether you gay bastards like it or not. You don't have to love me, but if you cooperate, I'll keep your asses alive and maybe, just maybe I'll get you out of this pissing sewer and back to your pathetic little lives. How does that suit you boys?"

Menhaus shrugged. "Yeah, whatever it takes."

Saks turned to Fabrini. "How about you, Richard fucking Simmons?"

Fabrini managed a nod.

"Crycek?"

Crycek was staring out into the fog.

"Yeah, well, we'll take that as a yes since you're shit-crazy to begin with."

So they sat there by lantern light in that lifeboat, listening to Saks's view on the world in general which was about fifty-percent truth and about fifty-percent bullshit. But it was something. Unlike the others, he had not retreated into his shell, hoping somebody'd pull him back out again. He had some ideas and some scenarios on how they were going to stay alive and be one big happy-assed family.

They were deep into the weed now, into the ship's graveyard like Cushing and the others. Although the fog was thicker than oatmeal and night had come on, black and eternal, they had seen things out there. The overturned hulls of ships, wreckage, an occasional glimpse of some old-time schooner or modern cutter rigged with fungus and weed, things like rotting old ghost ships. But never more than a glimpse. Just enough to make them realize that they were in a place of legend.

"Sooner or later, maybe when the night ends," Saks said, "we'll find us a decent ship. Something that hasn't been here too long. And when we find that, we'll call it

home."

"Home," Menhaus said. "I like that. *Home.* Jesus."

"Shut your hole," Saks told him. "The point being we can't drift around in this goddamn boat for the rest of our merry lives. We need something better. Something that might have a store of food and water, maybe some weapons or a good motor launch on her."

"A base of operations," Fabrini said.

"Exactly. That's our first order of business. Find a place that's dry and safe, then we can spend our time getting the lay of this place and weighing our options."

Nobody argued with any of that. One thing at a time.

Menhaus and Fabrini began debating what kind of place this was, to have all those ships trapped in the weeds.

"Sargasso Graveyard," Saks told them. "That's what the old salts called this place. The Sargasso Graveyard. Even the big steamships and diesel jobs end up here . . . they run out of fuel and drift into this cesspool. No way out. Then the weed grows all over 'em. But some of these ships, well, they have to have motorboats on 'em. That's what we want."

"Graveyard," Crycek said. "That's exactly what this place is: a graveyard."

"Lots of dead ships out there," Menhaus said. "And lots of dead crews to go with them, I'll bet."

The idea of that paled Fabrini somewhat.

But that wasn't what Saks wanted to talk about. He wanted to mention that other *craft* they had seen. The very thing that had prompted this entire line of conversation. Because they had seen something jutting from the weed and it was like nothing any of them had ever seen before.

"What the hell was that?" Saks put to them.

No bullshit, no insults, no bullying, he honestly wanted their opinion on what it was they had seen before the fog swallowed it again. Because, he knew one thing, he hadn't liked it. Just looking upon it for those few fleeting seconds had made something in him close up like an oyster. Made something else in him begin to shiver. For there were some things you honestly never wanted to see and particularly not in a place like this.

"It was a spaceship," Fabrini said, finally framing it into words for all of them. "Some kind of spaceship."

"Spaceship," Menhaus said. "My ass."

"That's what I was thinking," Saks said.

Menhaus just shook his head. "Oh, come on, you two. A fucking flying saucer? You hear what you're saying?"

They heard what they were saying just fine. Whatever it had been, it was sticking up out of the weed, the edge of something circular and streamlined. Blackened-looking like it had burned up. And it had been making a low, muted humming that was barely there. But they'd heard it, all right.

It was crazy stuff, to be sure. The stuff of pulp fiction and late-night movies. But when they'd seen it, they'd all been thinking the same thing. The monsters in the mist were bad enough and the slimy things in the Dead Sea, but this was something else entirely. This was the last thing they wanted to see. The last thing anybody ever wanted to

see, despite all the claims to the contrary. For the sight of something like that made your guts turn over and your head fill with a funny kind of noise. Because things like that were not supposed to be. Not really. And when you saw them, something in you cringed, the way a healthy cell might cringe at the idea of an invading alien microbe.

Particularly when you started wondering if there had been a *crew* aboard.

"I'm not buying that flying saucer shit," Menhaus said, about as stubborn as they'd ever seen him. "I don't believe in any of that shit. We only saw it for a few seconds. Could have been anything."

"Like what?" Fabrini wanted to know.

"Like . . . like maybe a hovercraft. They're round, right? Could have been one of those."

"A hovercraft?" Saks said, laughing now. "A fucking hovercraft? Didn't look much like a hovercraft to me."

"You know damned well what it was," Fabrini said. "We all do. I knew the minute I'd saw it and I didn't like it. Didn't like it at all. And you know why?"

Menhaus looked at him. "You tell me."

"Because it *scared* me, same as it scared all of you. And don't you goddamn try and deny it, any of you. It scared the shit out of all of us. Those dead ships are one thing, but-"

"That's enough," Menhaus said. "That enough already."

So that was it. They all knew something was eating him and here it was. He knew what it was they had seen, he just wouldn't admit to it and the reason for that was it had him scared silly.

"Yeah, that's enough," Saks said. "Menhaus isn't buying it, are you Menhaus?"

"I certainly am not."

"See, Fabrini? Menhaus don't believe in little green men from Mars. He's too damn sensible for that."

"Damn right I am," Menhaus said.

"It's all a big stupid joke and Menhaus isn't buying it."

Menhaus swallowed. "Well . . ."

"Sure, it's just a joke." Saks looked amused. "A big, stupid, silly-assed joke. All right, Fabrini, let's come clean already. This has all been a joke. The fog, the sea, all those big ghost ships out there. We set the whole thing up just to fuck with you, Menhaus. Candid Camera, right? Fabrini? Tell Alan Fundt to turn off that pissing fog machine and bring the lights up. We're not fooling Menhaus with this shit, he saw right through it. I told you that flying saucer would tip him off. Menhaus, he's just too smart for shit like this. Isn't that what I said? Isn't that what I told-"

"Fuck you," Menhaus said.

"Yeah, fuck me is right." He turned and looked at Fabrini. "Break them oars out, we'll row back there. I wanna show Menhaus how I made that prick out of coat hangers and old garbage bags. He's going to love this. Hey! Somebody turn the lights on already, enough is enough. Menhaus has had his fill."

Menhaus looked like maybe he wanted to cry.

"Take it easy," Fabrini told him. "So it's a fucking dead flying saucer and there's a couple little green men floating in the weeds. So what?"

"So what?" Menhaus shook his head. "What if they're not dead? What if they're alive right now and watching us? What then?"

Saks laughed. "Then you'll get that anal probing you've always been wanting."

"Fuck you, Saks. Just fuck you-"

"I think I saw it."

They were all looking at Crycek now who had kept out of the entire discussion thus far. He was still gazing out into the fog, but apparently he had been listening. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure I saw that thing come down." He turned and looked at them. "Before we picked you guys up . . . when it was just me and Cook and Hupp . . . I saw this sort of glowing blue light pass over us. It was up high, kind of hazy in the fog. I could only see that blue glow, nothing else. I been thinking . . . I been thinking that maybe it was that flying saucer coming down. Why the hell not? This goddamn place might have a hundred doors to it. Maybe that ship got sucked through one of 'em, same way we did."

"But if they can build a ship like that, something that jumps around from star to star like in those shows," Fabrini began, "then they'd have to be real smart. That kind of technology is about a thousand years or a hundred thousand from where we are. You wouldn't think a race like that could get sucked in here and even if they did, you'd think they'd know how to fly back out."

Saks said, "Maybe the thing was damaged. It looked kind of burnt or something. Crusty."

Menhaus was just sitting there with his arms folded.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Menhaus," Saks said. "We're leaving you out of the loop again. See, we're talking about this movie we saw once about these queers lost in the Bermuda Triangle. This big, dumb fat lick of dogshit named Menhaus don't believe that these ass-raping little green fuckers from the Andromeda galaxy have come to sodomize him. Movie was called *Invasion of the Butt-Guppies* or *I Married a Leather-Boy from Outer Space.* Something like that. It was one hell of a flick, I tell you."

Fabrini joined in, laughing now with an almost hysterical sound. "Sure, I remember it. But I think it was called *It Came in My Inner Space* or *The Man from Planet XXX."* He couldn't stop laughing. "Remember that movie poster, Saks? It said: *In space, no one can hear you squeal.* Oh, oh, oh, that was a good one. What a movie!"

Menhaus was just staring off blankly now. There were tears coming down his cheeks. He just looked . . . broken. Used-up and violated like something important in him had been handled, dirtied-up and then stuffed back inside of him. That's how he looked.

Crycek finally said, "None of this gets us anywhere."

He was right, of course.

Saks said, "Let's find us a ship somewhere so Menhaus can cry in private. Jesus H. Christ."

Fabrini got out the oars and Crycek and he started working them. It was hard pulling through that weed. Anything with a keel on it was going to have trouble cutting through that growth. But they kept pulling and pulling until they sighted a fishing boat.

"She ain't much," Saks said. "But she'll do for now."

About then, a sound rose up out in the fog. Something like a high, insane chittering. The sound of a beetle just completely out of its mind. When it sounded again it was closer. And they were all starting to imagine the mother of all crickets coming out of

the mist.

"Let's make that boat," Saks said. "I think our number is about up."

9

It was the sort of wild, implausible rescue that, looking back on it later, George could scarcely believe had happened in the first place. There they were, about to be eaten by that monster-squid and then flames began to spread over the weeds . . . and out pops a woman, tossing fuel oil at the beast and driving it off. She said her name was Elizabeth Castle. That they had about two minutes to get out of there before Mr. Squid came back, probably not in the best of moods.

After that, to George's thinking, things were a little fuzzy.

Everything happened very fast. They threw what gear they could into her boat . . . one of those flat-bottomed things that looked like a big box, you saw them on TV, people poling around the bayou in them . . . and carefully brought Gosling aboard, still not knowing what any of it was about and just goddamn happy they were being rescued.

Of course, Chesbro had to get some preaching in, saying, "You were sent by God, Miss, you surely were."

To which she politely replied, "If you say."

George and Pollard grabbed poles and joined the lady in directing them wherever it was they were going. That flat-bottomed little scow was really something in the weed. It glided right over the most tangled and knotted patches. Elizabeth Castle was apparently an old vet, because she steered them through the congested weed, darkness, and mushrooming fog where you couldn't see ten feet in any direction. She brought them back to a big sailing yacht that said *Mystic* on her bow and couldn't have been in the weed for too long.

On the way, Elizabeth had Chesbro toss pailfuls of fuel oil over the water at irregular intervals and light them up.

"The squid," was all she would say. "For the squid."

Then they were on board the yacht and had hoisted her flat-bottom aboard and that was it. It all came down quickly and efficiently. Elizabeth Castle was some kind of woman, all right.

And the *Mystic?*

Oh, she was big and beautiful.

That's what George thought as she came up out of the mist, sleek and proud with a bow sharp enough to slit paper. He never thought he could love something so abstract as a boat, but he loved this one. He loved her size, her sleek lines, her draft in the sea. She was a big sailboat and he was in love. And, admittedly, he would've loved her had she been but a leaky barge loaded with sewage and buzzing flies.

After that U.S. Army-issue tin can that wasn't much more than a buffet for the squid, yeah the *Mystic* was a beauty. Sure, she'd been through some rough weather and tough times-the sails were hanging like dirty rags from the shrouds and the masts themselves looked haggard, leaning awkwardly like they were ready to come down any minute-but all in all, the *Mystic* was looking pretty damn nice in comparison to the other hulks and derelicts going to rot in the weeds.

They went into the main cabin. Like the rest of the boat it smelled of dampness and dank mildew. It was carpeted in a thick, rich burgundy shag that nearly swallowed

your feet. And it was dry, warm. Nice. There was a fixed oak table in the center of the room and a settee along each wall upholstered with fat cushions the color of blood. There was a bar with a leather bumper bad encircling it. It was a big, roomy place and George figured twenty people could've lounged around in there comfortably. In the back of his mind he could almost hear the laughter and drinks being poured, smell cigarette smoke and women's perfume. He didn't know who'd owned the *Mystic,* but he was willing to bet that whoever they'd been, they'd been rich.

"Is this your boat?" Cushing asked.

Elizabeth Castle shrugged. "Now it is." She went into the next room, a galley probably and they could smell wood smoke. Again, it was nice. When she came back, she announced, "I'll heat some coffee."

They had Gosling stretched out on one of the couches. Cushing had given him a preloaded syringe of Demerol and he was feeling no pain. Which was about all they could do for him. Everyone introduced themselves and George gave her an encapsulated version of how they'd ended up in the Dead Sea and how it was they'd been on the transport plane.

"I watched you," she told them. "I saw you coming through the mist on my telescope while it was still light. I had hoped you'd choose a better vessel than that one."

George felt oddly like he'd been chastised. He swallowed. Elizabeth Castle was the first woman he'd seen in . . . Jesus, it was getting so he couldn't remember anymore. But it had been awhile. Since they'd sailed on the *Mara Corday* from Norfolk. He wasn't sure exactly how long that had been now. Days and days. Maybe weeks. Regardless, he hadn't seen a woman since the docks. He supposed, at that moment, he was in love with Elizabeth Castle as he figured they all were. She would never be called beautiful, he decided, she was simply too hard-looking, too intense, but she was certainly striking. Tall and sleek, a sort of feline intensity about her green eyes, a full-lipped mouth that was unabashedly sensual.

She wore clothes that looked homemade . . . gray woolen pants and a matching baggy-sleeved shirt, worn leather vest and high black boots . . . like the outfit of a 19th century sailor. They were shapeless garments, designed for practicality rather than vanity, but she fit them very well. With her long auburn hair tossed over one shoulder and those green eyes blazing, she made you want to stare and keep staring.

"Your friend," she said, standing over Gosling, "the squid?"

George nodded.

She didn't look exactly concerned, but not unconcerned either. She was oddly emotionless, toughened by this anti-world, wore a mask that you didn't dare try to lift.

"If you battle the squid," she said, "you'd better understand the squid."

With that, she went back into the galley. They could hear her in there, rattling tin cups.

"Maybe I'm dreaming all this," George said.

"Maybe we all are," Cushing said. He went to Gosling, checked his pulse and then his eyes. Did not look exactly optimistic about any of it.

The woman returned with tin cups steaming with coffee. Just the aroma was enough to make George want to weep. Maybe he did. He took the cup she offered him and it was warm and soothing in his hands. The coffee wasn't the best he'd ever tasted,

but right then, he couldn't remember ever having any that good.

"The squid only hunts at night," she explained to them. "During the day, it dives deep. It does not like light."

"I take it you've had dealings with it before?" George said.

She ignored him, was watching Cushing with Gosling. Watching him very intently. There was almost a softness around her mouth when she looked at Cushing, like maybe he reminded her of someone else. And maybe he did.

"Are you a doctor, Mr. Cushing?"

He shook his head. "No, I've had a little medical training. Just enough to get by."

She stared at him for a time, turned away. "The squid only surfaces at night. Your lights might have drawn it in. I think it hunts by motion, by body heat . . . it may have been curious about your light. And then . . . its claws are venomous. Your friend could die."

"You know a lot about that creature, don't you?" Cushing said.

"It's been here long as I have." She considered that a moment. "I think it may live in the bottom of one of the old derelicts."

"How long have you been here?" Chesbro asked.

She sighed. "I'm not sure. For a time we kept track, but not anymore. It seems like I've always been here. It's been years, I know that much."

"You said 'we' . . . are there others?"

She shook her head. "There is myself, my Auntie Else . . . nobody else. There were ten of us once. The squid killed three the first week. The others . . . they were attacked by other things. My Uncle Richard, he died . . . was it last year? I can't remember. He died of a heart ailment, I think. He went in his sleep. Now it's just we two."

George was struck by her almost formal mode of speech. It was peculiar. The sort of diction people used at one time in written correspondence. The idea of that started giving him some funny ideas about how long she'd been there.

"Where is your aunt?" Chesbro asked.

"Sleeping. She's old . . . she's not in her right mind most of the time. Please understand that when you meet her. She's been through a lot."

"How do you live here?" George asked. "I mean, what do you eat? Where do you get your food?"

She told him that they lived basically by scavenging. New boats showed up in the seaweed sea all the time, many each year. She raided them for food and supplies, clothing and blankets and fuel oil, anything she could get. She was always looking for survivors, too, but most of them were either dead, missing, or mad by the time they made it this far.

"I'm not the only person here, you know," Elizabeth said. "I know of five or six others. Most of them are mad, though. You're all welcome to stay here with us for as long as you want."

"I was hoping you'd say that," George said, smiling, but getting nothing in return.

Your boyish charm doesn't shine shit with this girl, he told himself. So just cool it. Besides, quit thinking what you're thinking . . . you've got a wife and kid back in the world.

True enough, he knew. But Elizabeth Castle *was* desirable. There was something

very savage and untamed about her, exotic even. Those eyes, that lilt of hungry mouth, the long-limbed muscular grace she exhibited. But George told himself to stop right there. For he was married and even if he wasn't, this woman looked at him about as cold as cold could be. You got out of line with her, she'd scratch your eyes out. That was the feeling he was getting from her. She reminded him of a warrior maiden. A woman you knew could out-fight you and probably out-think you, too.

Besides, he thought, *you see how she's looking at Cushing. Ain't the way a sister looks at her brother, you catch my drift.*

Sure, Cushing. He had an easy, open way about him. You knew looking into those blue eyes of his that he was intelligent and compassionate, loyal and steady. He was also tall and blond-haired, handsome in a Nordic sort of way. Women probably always went for him.

She told them that she couldn't honestly remember much of her life before the ship she was on — the *Catherine Belling* — was pulled into the mist en route from Savannah to Bermuda. George figured she could, but didn't want to. She said that, after a time, the only thing that really mattered was survival, staying alive. That it became a mantra after awhile. There was always work to be done and her days were occupied, so there was very little time to think about what was and what could have been. George figured that was bullshit, too.

"We have a lot of food," she told them. "Canned and dried, salt pork and bacon. Often, when a new ship arrives, I find fresh meat and fruit, a variety of things. I grow vegetables on another ship in soil that came in boxes. Things grow very fast here."

"Like the weed," George said. "That fungus."

"Yes." She looked very stern. "You must always be careful about what you eat or drink. You have to boil the water out there before you drink it. It's salty, but not as salty as the seas back home. But it has germs in it. They can make you very sick. Mostly, I drain water from the tanks of ships. One more thing. You're welcome here, but understand that there are rules. And the most important is that you never leave this ship unless I'm with you. Later, once you know this place, you can . . . but not until then."

"How long does the night last?" George asked her. "A day? Two days?"

At that question, it seemed like Elizabeth was real close to a smile. Close, but not quite there. "I'm so used to this . . . sometimes it's hard to remember day and night back there, back where we came from." She sat on the settee, placed her hands on her knees. "The day here . . . what we could call the day . . . lasts about three of our days, sometimes four. The night lasts about two days."

She said that the mists were so thick that you never actually saw the sun there, though at certain times of the year you could catch a glimpse of it. But never for long. Not like you could with the moons when they were full. Which got George to thinking that if there was a sun and moons, well, then this wasn't just some cosmic dead-end, it was a world. A planet caught in the orbit of some star he'd never heard of. One that no earth astronomer had probably ever heard of either.

Cushing asked her how large the seaweed sea was and she couldn't tell him. It was vast, she knew, maybe hundreds if not thousands of miles in diameter, but the exact dimensions were unknown. "I know that you could travel for two days straight and never find anything but weed and water. I've never seen any land and never heard of anyone

that has."

"There must be thousands of ships and planes out there," George said.

"And they keep coming," Elizabeth said. "Sometimes nothing for months and then, suddenly, three or four, five or six. In batches, they always come in batches. But as far as you go in the weed, you'll find wreckage. Some of it very, very old."

Chesbro had his head bowed over, praying silently.

Elizabeth Castle was watching him intently. "Is he a minister?" she asked.

But Cushing just shook his head. "No, he just has a deep and abiding faith," Cushing said with all sincerity.

Good for you, George thought.

Anyone else might have said that Chesbro was a Jesus freak, a religious nut . . . but not Cushing. He wouldn't go there and you couldn't make him. That's the kind of guy he was.

"You are very quiet, Mr. Pollard," Elizabeth remarked.

He nodded. "I guess . . . I guess I don't have much to say."

"He's okay," Cushing told her. "He's been through a lot."

She and Cushing sat there discussing the specifics of this mad new world, the sort of things that lived there and all the people that must have perished there through the centuries, through the eons. It was real cheerful stuff. Elizabeth spoke of this place as something to be beaten down, something you had to fight at every turn, but nothing you could ever conquer. She was a stubborn, hard-headed woman by all accounts and maybe that's how she had survived here — through ingenuity and rigid persistence. Maybe all the death she'd seen had made her cling to life all that much more tenaciously.

George thought she looked healthy. Her eyes were bright and her hair was lustrous, her teeth white and strong. But she was pale, her complexion like flawless porcelain. But that was probably due to the lack of sunshine. If people lived here generation by generation, breeding in this place, sooner or later they would have lost all skin pigment.

"All we've been holding out for," Cushing said, "is a way out."

"There is no way out," Elizabeth said, her voice stern.

"Have you ever tried?" George put to her.

She gave him a hard, withering look and he felt himself sneak about two inches closer to death. But he didn't give a shit if it offended her or not. He hated that smug certainty in her voice. Maybe she was satisfied with this place, but there was no way in hell he ever would be.

"Tried? No, I haven't. Where would I begin?" She kept looking at him. "After a time, there's only survival. That's all you can think about."

"How long have you been here?" Cushing said. "You said years, but-"

"What year did you sail to Bermuda?" George asked, getting right to it.

"What year? Well, I remember that very well. It was March, the second week of March, 1907."

That landed like a brick and now everyone was staring at her, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

"Jesus H. Christ," George said. "1907? Oh my God . . ."

There was a sudden vulnerability to her, she looked lost and confused and she was

certainly those things. She chewed her lip. “I . . . I’ve been here a long time, haven’t I?”

10

"I'm just not up to it," Menhaus announced. "I just don't have what it takes. I know that now. I played the game and did my best, but, Jesus, I just don't have the stomach for this."

Fabrini said, "C'mon now, you can't give up."

"Why can't I?"

But Fabrini didn't have a good answer for that. He figured Cook might have, but not him. It just wasn't in him, all the right answers to the right questions. "Because you fucking can't, that's why."

They were sitting on the deck of the fishing boat, an old side trawler out of Florida according to the paperwork in the wheelhouse, trying to figure out what it all meant. What it was all about now that Cook was gone and they were under Saks's hand again. Something nobody particularly cared for. Saks was down in the captain's cabin sleeping and Crycek was next door, not sleeping, but lost in one of his blue funks. When he got like that, he was pretty much unreachable. When he spoke, it was all doom and gloom and devils in the fog, prophecies.

"I don't trust Saks," Menhaus said. "We had a chance with Cook, I think we really had a chance . . . but now we're screwed. Saks doesn't give a shit about anyone but himself."

Some great revelation, that. "No, and he never did. That's the kind of prick he is. But I say we just play it out, see what it's worth. Saks wants to be Mr. Big Man? Okay, let him. Give him the ball and let him run with it."

Menhaus nodded glumly, barely visible in the darkness. "But I think we had a chance with Cook. I think we really did have a chance."

Fabrini didn't like thinking about Cook. He'd come to trust Cook, to like Cook, and his death had not been an easy one and living with the memory of it was harder yet. "Saks has a plan," Fabrini said.

"Does he?"

"Sure. He's got an angle. A guy like Saks has always got an angle." Fabrini sketched out for him what Saks had said. "So, we do like he said: we wait for the fog to lighten, for day or whatever it is to come back. That's what we have to do. When that happens, we start exploring. Start seeing if there's any people out there. Maybe find us a decent boat, look for some land and maybe some answers to this mess."

"There's no answers."

"Sure, there is. You just have to be patient. One day at a time. Trust me, Menhaus, and just play along with him. I hate that guy more than anybody." He touched his bandaged ear in the dark. "But one thing I do know is that guys like Saks are survivors. They have a way of staying alive and if we throw in with him, we're probably going to stay alive, too."

"Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Believe me, if there's a way out of this rathole, Saks is just the sort of guy who can find it. So we hang tight, we follow his plan and maybe . . . who knows . . . maybe we'll find some others out there. Somebody who'll know the way out

or have a good guess about it."

"I still don't like him," Menhaus said.

Fabrini chuckled. "Nobody likes that asshole. But if we wanna stay alive . . ."

"Then we play the game."

"You got it."

But Menhaus didn't look exactly pleased at the idea of playing any game where a guy like Saks was making up the rules. It was a good way to die.

"I don't like that shit on his arm," Menhaus admitted. "I don't know what it is, but it looks catchy."

"So don't dance with him," Fabrini said.

Menhaus uttered a tiny laugh. "It's so easy for you, Fabrini, it's so damn easy for you."

"No," Fabrini said. "It's not."

11

The way Cushing had it figured, time was probably horribly distorted in the Dead Sea. When you passed through the vortex, you weren't necessarily coming out on the other side in the time period you'd left. Time here was not in any direct linear alignment with the world you knew. This is how he explained it to George. Maybe you got swallowed by the fog in 1950, but you came out on the other side in 2010. It was pretty wild fringe science but it made as much sense as anything else. At least it could explain Elizabeth Castle who was certain that she had sailed in 1907 and hadn't been here more than four or five years at most.

"I mean, she says she came through in 1907 when she was twenty-three," Cushing said. "Look at her, she's no more than twenty-six or twenty-seven. Her time frame works, doesn't it?"

George had to admit that it did. "Unless . . . unless there is no time here as we understand it."

"There has to be. It's a universal constant. Tine and space are interlinked, they do not exist without one another. They are the nail, George, upon which everything is hung. Time may slow down as Einstein said or even speed up, but it never ceases to exist. The days come and the nights come. Time passes. If it wasn't passing at all, if we were trapped in some sort of time loop, then those ships out there would never begin to rot in the first place. And we . . . would look exactly as we did when we'd come through. And we don't." He laughed, scratched at the growth of beard on his face. "I shaved that morning before we ran into the fog. Now I'm growing a beard . . . which means what?"

"You lost me."

"It *means* that my body's processes aren't in suspension. Everything's chugging along like normal. And if I'm here for another month or two, I'll have a real beard. And if I'm here for fifty more years, I'll have a long white beard."

Okay, that worked for George. Time had to be passing. Maybe Cushing's theory was viable. It would explain things. Like how some of the modern-day freighters out there looked like they'd been languishing in the weed for centuries and some of the old brigs looked comparatively recent. Full of weeds and fungus, but nowhere near the state you'd expect.

"Which means that, next week or next month, an ancient Arab sailing galley drifts in or a Roman triremes comes oaring in, don't be too surprised," Cushing said.

Which gave George some disconcerting ideas on the whole. What if they *did* find a way out and were vomited back into the Atlantic in the 2nd century A.D. or in 1931 for that matter? What then? What then? But thinking like that was pointless. Really pointless. Time would have to take care of itself.

Bottom line, things were distorted in this place.

And it wasn't just time either. Because the next morning . . . still pitch black, but seemed like it might be morning . . . Cushing and George got to meet Elizabeth Castle's Aunt Else. And that was quite an experience. She was just this little thing that might have been put together out of sticks and twine, her hair frosted white, her face lined and sallow. She walked with a cane and looked very confused when she was introduced to Cushing

and George like she had been woken suddenly from a dream.

"My Auntie is ill sometimes," Elizabeth said, helping her sit on one of the sofas.

"Bosh!" said Aunt Else. "I'm perfectly fine. Never felt better."

Her eyes were glazed by time and she had a habit of losing concentration and staring off into space for extended periods of time.

When Elizabeth was off making coffee, Aunt Else said, "Well, I had long suspected that you would return, Captain Dorrigan." She said this to George. "I can't say that I'm overwhelmed to see you. Time has not erased your misdeeds. You, sir, are guilty of gross misconduct."

George waited for the punchline, but none came. "Misconduct?"

"You should consider your position, Captain, and be quite careful of what you say," Aunt Else warned him. "Your transgressions are unforgivable and I can assure you that my husband will arrange for a Naval board of inquiry to look into your negligence. A man like you has no business piloting a ship."

George got it now. "Um . . . I think you have me confused with someone else."

"Nonsense! Don't try that tact with me, sir. You'll find me most unforgiving when it comes to subverting the facts. You are guilty of negligence. A negligence that has cost the lives of your crew. Perhaps you and your attorney —" she was looking at Cushing now — "have cooked up some scheme to keep yourselves out of the hands of justice, but you are guilty in the eyes of God."

"I . . . ah . . . I was under the weather that day, Madam."

"Drunk is more like it."

Man, this was sweet, George was thinking. The old lady thought he was the captain of her ship and she was holding him personally responsible for whatever the disaster had been.

"I'll throw myself on the mercy of the court when we get back," George said.

"And so you should. So you should."

She lapsed into another one of her silences, humming softly under her breath and George was wondering if she ever really came out of her fugue. If not, it would be tough to deal with something like this on a permanent basis.

"It was a clear day as I recall," Aunt Else began again. "A very lovely day and Richard . . . where is Richard? Have you seen him, Captain?"

"I . . . I think he's up on deck."

"Of course he is. As I said, it was a very clear day and the night proceeding it was clear and the sky was filled with stars. You never see that many stars unless you're out at sea. Just beautiful. Then that fog . . . it was terrible that fog. We were trapped in it for weeks, long weeks. Hmm. I wonder if it's cleared yet. Has the fog cleared yet, Captain?"

"Any day now, Ma'am."

George went over with Cushing to see to Gosling. His eyes were open, but he looked like he was trapped deeper in dreamland than Aunt Else. When he saw George he reached out his hand and clutched George's own. He blinked a few times, looked like he was trying to hold something down.

"How you feeling?" George asked him.

"Like . . . shit," he said.

"Please tell your sailors to refrain from profanity," Aunt Else said.

Elizabeth came back in with more coffee. Gosling took a little, but he was terribly weak and it was tough seeing him like that. He'd always been so rugged and healthy, so very full of life. Always in charge. Seeing him laid low like that wasn't an easy thing to take. He would say a few words and drift off, come awake again and shake his head.

"I ain't long for this world, George," he said.

"Sure you are. You just need to knit up."

"Knit up? Shit. I'm done in and I know it." His eyes flickered closed, then open again. "I just want to sleep now. That's all I want to do. Don't . . . don't be looking like that, it's not so bad. That woman . . . not the crazy old bitch . . . but that other one, she might know a way out."

Cushing shook his head. "She says she doesn't."

"And you believe that?"

"Well . . ."

"Well, nothing. She knows more than she's saying. You keep at her, you keep at her." He swallowed a few times. "Either of you boys . . . you make it back. I got . . . I got a daughter up in Providence. You look her up. You tell her how it was for her old man. You tell her that."

Gosling lapsed into slumber and did not wake again. He wasn't dead, but George could tell from the look in Cushing's eyes that he wasn't very far from it now.

"I wish there was something I could do for your friend," Elizabeth said. Cushing offered her a thin smile.

"A spring party is always the best," Aunt Else was saying. "Particularly on Bermuda. A lovely garden party under the palms. Oh, it's just wonderful. The sea air and the sunshine. Lots of fruit and cold drinks. A steel drum band . . ."

"I found your boat," Elizabeth said.

"My boat? Oh, I had a lovely little skiff when I was a child on Cape Cod," Aunt Else said. "Do you remember that? It was white with an ocean-blue stripe around the hull. We used to go fishing. I can't remember what we used to fish for . . . do you remember?"

Cushing looked surprised. "You went out there?"

"Only to get the boat. It was drifting just off the stern," Elizabeth explained. "It's torn up a bit, but it looks to be in good shape. It's filled with air, isn't it? I've seen other boats like that here. Mostly, there's no one in them."

"Boats full of air! Bosh!" Aunt Else said. "Something's full of air around here, but it's certainly not boats!"

"Well, at least we have the raft if we need it," George said.

Elizabeth stared at him. "Yes, I suppose."

George could almost feel the panic coming off of her. The idea that they might shove off and leave her with her crazy aunt was scaring her. "Well," he said, "not like we're going anywhere right now anyway."

"I'd like to go to France," Aunt Else announced.

"Maybe in the summer," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah, I hear it's nice there in the summer," George said.

Cushing looked at him, suppressing a smile.

"You never mind, Captain," Aunt Else said. "France is not where you'll be going."

“Please, Auntie,” Elizabeth said. “Just drink your coffee before it gets cold.”

Else rapped her cane against the table. “And you would think, wouldn’t you, in this day and age, that someone would invent an olive without a pimento stuffed in it. Is that too much to ask? Is it really too much to ask? A pimento-less olive? My husband refuses a martini with a pimento-stuffed olive in it. Can you blame him? Can you honestly blame him?”

“Auntie gets confused,” Elizabeth said under her breath.

George nodded. “That’s okay, we-”

“I heard what you said, young lady. I would have thought you were brought up better than that. What would your mother think? What would she say if she saw you dressed like that?”

Cushing helped Elizabeth make their breakfast, which was just canned fruit and dry cereal. But there was oatmeal and bacon, too. And Cushing made some scrambled eggs from the MRE pouches. It was simple fare, but it tasted like a gourmet meal after being on the raft so long eating crackers and petrified survival bread.

Chesbro and Pollard showed soon enough. They looked better than they had in some time after a real sleep in a real bed. It did wonders. Chesbro was still taciturn, but Pollard seemed to be in good spirits.

“Well, I see we finally roused you boys,” Else said. “Well, eat up and then off with you. Is there school today? No, oh well. Go out and play. Eat up! Eat up!”

“She thinks you’re her sons,” Elizabeth told them. “They died years ago.”

Pollard and Chesbro looked like a couple of actors who’d just walked out on stage and couldn’t remember their lines.

“Just play along for the time being,” Cushing told them.

As she ate, Aunt Else would pause from time to time, gesture with a fork full of scrambled eggs. “I’m trying to remember all the details, trying to keep it fresh in my mind. I think it’ll be important at the trial.”

“What trial?” Pollard said.

George just shook his head. “Never mind. She thinks I’m Captain Hook or something.”

Which got him another one of those acidic looks from Elizabeth. He supposed he could have been more understanding, more compassionate. But the truth of the matter was that he’d seen too much, experienced too much by that point, and things like sympathy were hard to come by. He was just making friends all over the place. Chesbro wouldn’t even look at him anymore since he’d punched him out. Thing was, George didn’t give a shit. He honestly just didn’t give a shit.

He thought: *Give me another six months of this bullshit. Give me a year. By then there won’t be much human left in me . . . or in any of us.*

Pollard, who seemed relaxed now, at ease for the first time since George had met him, finished his food. “It was nice to sleep in a bed. I can’t tell you how nice it was to finally sleep in a bed. I was beginning to think there weren’t such things as beds anymore. I know how stupid that sounds, but, shit, that’s exactly what I was starting to believe. Maybe . . . maybe once we’re settled, we can start giving some serious thought to where we are and how the hell we can get out.”

Cushing raised an eyebrow at that.

Elizabeth just said, “There’s no way out.”

“She likes it here,” George said. “She never wants to leave.”

Which got him yet another evil look from her. “Did I say that? Did I ever say I liked it here? That I wanted to stay?”

George was loving it. The old ice queen was beginning to thaw a bit. Apparently, there were some decent human feelings under the permafrost.

“Yes,” Aunt Else said, carefully counting the tines of her fork over and over, “but what you say, dear, and what you mean might be two different things.”

Elizabeth was looking really pissed-off now. They were forcing her into a corner and her claws were coming out. It had been a long, long time since she’d had to answer to anyone, to justify her actions or her lack of them.

“All right,” Cushing said. “Let’s take it down a notch here.”

“Prisoners,” Pollard said. “I don’t think I can live like that.”

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Aunt Else?”

“How long are you going to keep us here as prisoners?”

“Aunt Else . . .”

“Don’t deny it,” Aunt Else said, shaking a finger at her recalcitrant niece. “You’ve kept me here under lock and key for far too long. I think I’m within my rights to ask how long you intend to keep this up. Well? What have you got to say for yourself?”

Elizabeth had nothing to say for herself. She just stood there, under attack by her own aunt, looking suddenly older, heavier, ungainly like maybe she just didn’t have the strength to hold herself up anymore. She looked at Cushing, because he was the only one she felt a connection with. Then, blushing, she cleared plates and cups onto a platter and took them into the galley.

“Where’d she go?” George said.

“Oh, silly girl,” Aunt Else said. “Probably off to pout. You’ll find her sleeping in the cabbage with one purple wing.”

George tittered under his breath. *“What?”*

*“*Don’t encourage this,” Cushing told him.

He stalked off after Elizabeth, leaving George with the perpetually-brooding Chesbro, the unconscious Gosling, the very-confused Pollard, and . . . yes, Aunt Else of course, who was maybe a little of all of those things and a few others, too.

“I think what we need here is a man in charge,” Aunt Else said, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “Yes, yes, yes. A man in charge. I don’t think my niece is up to it.”

“Looks like she’s done okay so far,” George said.

Aunt Else was looking over at Gosling like she was having the conversation with him. She threw back her head and laughed. “Oh, listen to that, will you? *Men.* They only want one thing and they’ll say just about anything to get it!”

George was laughing now. “Did I miss something here?”

“Maybe she’s right,” Pollard said.

“About me wanting one thing?”

“No, about somebody else being in charge. Maybe Elizabeth needs a break. Maybe she’s been here way too long. Maybe she can’t see the forest through the trees. Maybe you should take over.”

"Me?"

"Why not you?"

"Cushing's in charge."

But Pollard shook his head. "No, he's not. Ever since the First . . . well, ever since Mister Gosling has been sick, you've been in charge. Cushing's like an advisor or something. He's smart, but he doesn't like making decisions. You should be in charge."

"Don't listen to him," Aunt Else said. "He's only a boy, Captain. A lying little boy and you can't trust lying little boys. He'll say anything to get his way. He's always been like that. Manipulative."

George felt overwhelmed. He was having trouble keeping up. "That's a hell of a way to talk about your son."

"Captain," she said. "I'll ask you not to interfere in family matters."

"I'm just saying that maybe you're the guy to be in charge is all," Pollard said. "That's all I'm saying."

George held his tongue. He didn't want to be in charge. It was the last thing in the world he really wanted . . . yet, if Elizabeth was going to maroon them all here without a single hope of deliverance, then maybe they did need different leadership. But then again, she knew this place. She knew what they were up against . . . and what really did he know?

"I prefer a democracy," was all he would say.

"Just an idea," Pollard said.

"I've never cared much for politics," Aunt Else told them. "I lost interest after McKinley was assassinated. I think Roosevelt was an idiot. A lot of us thought Roosevelt was an idiot. But he was smart, wasn't he? Crafty, wasn't he? He knew the common man believed as he did and he used that power, that popular appeal. My father lost money during the coal strike."

Cushing came back in. "What are you people talking about?"

"Politics," George told him. "Did you favor Roosevelt, sir?"

"Bully," was all Cushing would say on that matter.

12

Saks had it all figured out.

Maybe they thought he was really stupid, but he saw what was going on. He knew what Fabrini and Menhaus were up to. Same way he'd known what Fabrini and Cook had been up to. Jesus, you try to help these guys and first chance they got, they started scheming behind your back. Now that was gratitude. And it was just too bad, just too damn bad when you thought about it, because Saks had been starting to think that maybe Fabrini wasn't so bad after all. Maybe he could mold the guy, make him into a real man, but that wasn't going to happen.

Minute you trusted a guy like Fabrini, you were finished. First time you turned your back on him he'd slit your throat.

All right then, all right, he thought as he laid there on the captain's bunk. *You guys want to play it this way, you want to play games with me? I'll show you a couple fucking games you never even heard of. This is where you sonsofbitches learn what it's all about.*

Saks calmed himself.

No, he wasn't going to kill them. At least not Menhaus or Crycek, but Fabrini was a different matter. That little prick had to be made an example of. He was the same rotten apple that had gotten Cook thinking funny and now he was turning Menhaus.

Saks didn't know how he was going to do it, but it was going to be spectacular. Those who saw Fabrini's end would never forget it. Not in this lifetime.

Rubbing the sores along his arms and chest, Saks began to plot.

13

One minute there was life and the next there was death.

You could guard against it and fight it at every turn with drugs and disinfectants and healing bandages, but you only beat it back into the shadows. And it was there, in that damp and sullen darkness, that death grew like a tumor, reached out and clutched, squeezed, became something huge and hungry and inevitable. Breathing toxins and fevers. Its cold fingers were iron once they had taken hold and no man could hope to pry them loose. You could try, but death only grabbed that much harder, recognizing its own and determined to take what belonged to it. And it would not stop until life had been uncorked and spilled to the floor and there was only darkness, a whispering darkness that pulled you down and down . . .

When Gosling died they wrapped him up in a waterproof tarp from the raft and had Chesbro quote some scripture over him. It was the best they could do. Elizabeth managed to keep her Aunt Else out of the entire affair and that was a good thing. Because George was taking it hard, was feeling Gosling's death like his insides were filled with tacks and ground glass. Whichever way he turned, he hurt and hurt badly. And had Aunt Else laid into him about his negligence as captain of the ship, he would have shared some of that pain with her, he knew. Said things to her that would have waxed her lips shut forever.

They performed the threadbare service out on the deck by lantern light. It was a grim and disturbing affair, those lanterns flickering and shadows jumping and that fog pressing in like corpse-gas.

Then Gosling was put over the side in his weighted shroud. At first, he just languished on the weed and George thought, with a terrible sinking feeling inside him, that the body would never sink. It would lodge itself right there and make him look at it day by day . . . but then, slowly, it melted into the weed and the last remains of Paul Gosling, first mate of the *Mara Corday,* sank from view and something in George sank with them.

As George watched the body disappear, he kept thinking: Message in a bottle, message in a bottle.

14

When Cushing saw the boat, it took his breath away.

For one crazy, reeling moment he thought it was bearing down on them, a ghost ship coming at them out of the weed. But it wasn't moving. It was just dead and vacant-looking, another derelict caught in the creeping weed of the ship's graveyard. Ribbons and filaments of mist were rising from its decks and derricks as if it were exhaling pale swamp vapors. It was an old wooden purse seiner with a black, scathed hull and a white wheelhouse that had gone gray and dingy with mildew. Her prow was sharp, looked like it could slit open the underbelly of the weed quick as a razor . . . but beyond that, it was simply dead.

Forgotten.

Abandoned.

Cushing saw it there in the fog and he could tell right away that Elizabeth wanted no part of it. The way she looked at it and then at him, told him that this vessel was shunned like the neighborhood haunted house. And it did look haunted. More than just empty. Occupied somehow, but not lived-in.

Day had broke now . . . what day there was in the Dead Sea . . . and Cushing had joined Elizabeth on one of her little expeditions in the graveyard. She had shown him the old barge where she tended her gardens, the freighters which had more fresh water in their tanks than you could drink in a lifetime. And now, there was this old fishing boat, a sixty-eight footer of the sort that had not been seen in years. Cushing was willing to bet her keel had been laid back in the 1920s.

"We should get back," was all Elizabeth would say.

But Cushing had no intention of leaving. He was standing there in the scow with her, one of the flat-bladed poles in his hands. "Tell me about that boat," he said.

"Just another wreck."

"No, it's not. I can see it in your eyes . . . this one is different. What's its story?"

She just stood there a moment, like maybe she was trying to come up with something good that he would believe and would get them out of there and back to the *Mystic.* Finally, she sighed. "It's . . . it's where the Hermit lives. It's his boat."

"The Hermit?"

She nodded. "Some old man. He was here when we first got here. He doesn't like people much. He has a gun."

But, for some reason, Cushing wasn't buying that. "Have you ever talked to him?"

"He's crazy."

"And he was here when you got here?"

"Yes."

Which, of course, added fuel to Cushing's time-distortion theory. If Elizabeth and the others had arrived here in 1907 and this boat was already here, something that looked like it couldn't be any older than the '20s, then it all came together, didn't it? This fishing boat was built much later than the ship that had brought Elizabeth's people to the seaweed sea . . . yet it had arrived before them.

"I want to board her," Cushing said. "I want to talk to this Hermit."

"Mr. Cushing, please . . ."

"You don't have to come."

Cushing smiled.

Elizabeth frowned.

Standing there, seeing it in the weed like that, all wrapped up in tissues of mist, it did look like a haunted house jutting from some overgrown, neglected yard. It was big and ghostly and soundless, the wheelhouse windows boarded shut, the bowline hung with a caul of weed. The decks were wreathed with shadows, a mat of fungus growing up over the aft stanchions and winches. There was a lot of wreckage on the foredeck . . . metal and fused plastic and all manner of debris that were blackened as if by a fire.

Cushing just watched it, let it fill him up. It was just another boat, yet he was certain that it was saying something to him.

"Let's take a look," he said.

She shook her head and they began to pole through the weeds until they were close enough that he could grab hold of her bulwarks and pull them along side.

Cushing pulled himself up and over the railing. The decks were moist and slimy and he almost went on his ass. The planking creaked beneath his weight, but held okay. Elizabeth tossed him a line and he tied off the scow to the fencerail. He helped her aboard, but she was very strong and lithe and didn't seem to need his help. She looked nervous, uncomfortable, something. Her right hand clutched the hilt of the machete she wore at her waist.

"He won't like us being here," she said.

Cushing stood there, feeling the boat under him and around him and he was certain that it was empty. There was nothing here but memory. He could feel it.

He moved forward, up around the mast tower, and up the short steps to the wheelhouse door. He knocked. Waited. Knocked again. Nothing . . . just the echo of his rapping knuckles inside, but nothing else. The door opened with a grating, groaning sound. It was dark and grainy inside. He found a lantern and lit it. Better. The Hermit had turned the wheelhouse into his quarters. There was a cot along one wall, books piled on the floor and in shelves. There was a writing desk scattered with papers and a table crowded with old charts. It smelled like an old library in there, like musty pages and rotting bindings.

Cushing went to the chart table.

Most of the charts were of the Atlantic, the Cape Hatteras region. But there was one that was not. It was hand-drawn. He studied it carefully in the lantern's light. The longer he studied it, the more excited he became. "You know what this is, don't you?" he said.

Elizabeth looked at it. "Yes," was all she would say.

It was a map of the ship's graveyard rendered very carefully in ink. It was very detailed, though uncompleted, and must have taken years. Apparently the Hermit had spent his time exploring the wrecks and he had put all their names down. "By God, look at these names . . . the *Enchantress,* the *Proteus,* the *Wasp,* the *Atlanta,* the *Raifuku Maru,* the *City of Glasgow* . . . these are all famous disappearances tied in with the Devil's Triangle."

"The *what?"* Elizabeth said.

Cushing just shook his head. “Nothing.” He was going over that chart. There were hundreds and hundreds of ships listed, from old galleons to modern container ships. Many were named, others were tagged as “Unknown”. The Hermit had sketched out where the weed was thickest, where the greatest fields of wreckage were to be found, places nearly impassable on account of the great concentration of wrecks. To what would have been east and west on a normal chart were just labeled UNKNOWN or UNEXPLORED. Some ships and some areas of the weed were tagged with skulls and crossbones.

“What do you suppose that means?” he asked Elizabeth.

She studied the chart. “I can’t say what all of them mean . . . but this one —” she put her finger on one labeled UNKNOWN BARK — “I think . . . yes . . . I think this is the one the squid lives in. In the bottom.”

So, then, that made sense. The skulls and crossbones indicated dangerous places. Other ships were marked with circles. The *Mystic* was marked thus and Cushing figured it meant that they were occupied. There weren’t many marked such. The Hermit had marked the open channels through the weed, the location of planes including what Cushing thought was the C-130. At the southern edge of the weed, was written SEA OF MISTS. And beneath that, OPEN SEA. In the latter there was a red X. It was large and circled several times.

“This must be where he figured he arrived,” Cushing said. “Probably where the vortex dumped him. I bet that’s where we came in, too.”

There was a dotted line leading from the red X to a smaller black X that was labeled *Ptolemy,* which must have been the name of the Hermit’s boat and its position in the weed.

As Cushing went through the ships, he found dozens of others he had heard of or read about, famous vanishings. About midway into the Sea of Mists, the derelicts were more spread out. But he found the *Cyclops,* a Navy collier that had disappeared during the First World War. It was marked with a skull and crossbones. To the north of the ship’s graveyard, the derelicts were fewer and the Hermit had marked channels cut through the weed that led to an area of what might have been open water. This was labeled OUTER SEA, and just about everything up there was tagged as being unknown or unexplored. Except, at the upper edge was another seaweed bank with a long rectangle lodged at its lower extremity, indicating a ship. S.S. *Lancet,* it said. There were a few other wrecks, most unnamed. Above the *Lancet* was what appeared to be another seaweed sea with wrecks, most of them labeled as being unexplored or unknown. And just above this, SEA OF VEILS. The Hermit had put a series of skulls and crossbones here. Whatever was up there, it must have been pretty damn bad.

“What do you make of this?” Cushing asked her.

Elizabeth didn’t even look where he was pointing. She just shrugged.

“And the *Lancet?”*

She sighed. “I’ve never been up there. It’s some kind of huge sailing ship . . . a ghost ship, my uncle said. Nobody comes back from up there.”

“What’s up there?”

“Let’s just go,” she said, avoiding the question.

Cushing rolled up the chart and went over to the writing desk. All the papers were

covered in weird notations and complex mathematical symbols. Some of it looked like geometry or possibly calculus. There were dozens of pages like this. Cushing was starting to wonder if this guy was just some lost fisherman or possibly something else entirely. He didn't suppose he'd ever know for sure.

He opened the desk drawers and found a .45 Colt auto. It was well-oiled and maintained. He ejected the magazine from the butt and it was fully-loaded. In the top drawer, there was a letter that went on for several pages in a cramped, economical script.

"Look at this," he said.

Elizabeth pretended interest. "We'd better go."

But Cushing wasn't going. Not yet. He began to read:

December 2, Year Unknown

To whom it may concern,

I, like you, have been trapped in this abominable place for more years than I would care to admit. But unlike you, my exile into this void has been self-imposed. Yes, that is true . . . I chose *to come here.*

Allow me to explain. I was part of a group of scholars and researchers, yes, mathematicians and physicists and quantum theorists, who had long been aware of the time/space anomalies associated with the Sargasso Sea/Devil's Triangle area. Betydon, Connors, Imab, and myself. We had long studied these aberrations . . . though privately, to avoid the ridicule often associated with such things publicly. Publicly, I say for each of us were at one time involved in what the ONR, the Office of Naval Research, called Project Neptune. Which was and is (I imagine) an ongoing investigation into sundry and shadowy areas of theoretical physics with potential marine/military applications. The group I and the others were involved in were concerned with the aforementioned time/space anomalies. The Neptune Project, of course, is highly classified. But I see no reason not to violate my loyalty oath here. At any rate, our little group studied these things privately after leaving the ONR. We called our little inquiry the Procyon Project. Now, after long years of formulating countless hypotheses (basically, a furtherance of what we had been doing with Neptune), we decided it was time to test our theories. I won't go into all of it. Just let me say, that we were proven correct and pulled into this place.

Connors died in the Sea of Mists, attacked by some type of sea monster. And the others? Well, I won't go into it. I'll only say that we were reconnoitering the Sea of Veils and particularly the S.S. Lancet, a vessel lost in this place in the 1850s and certainly the mother of all cursed ships.

Regardless, I am as surely marooned here as you are.

But what is this place? Where is this place? How can it possibly be? You may well wonder and it has taken me some years to put together the pieces of this puzzle and, even now, much of what I know or think I know is pure speculation ranging from the informed to the fantastic to the downright absurd. Before you toss aside this letter, this confession, and call me a crazy man, I think you owe it to yourself to read on.

First off, understand that if you are here — in this place — then you have undergone what could be deemed hyperdimensional travel. More on that later. No doubt you arrived here by passing into what appeared to be a cloud or fogbank which was

luminous. As you may or may not know such phenomena has been reported for a great many years in the Sargasso Sea/Devil's Triangle area, a place where curvature of space and time is most pronounced. And your ship or plane was, of course, somewhere in this somewhat vast geographical area. The cloud you saw, were pulled into, was actually a sort of matter-energy vortex, a warp or rift in the space-time continuum. To understand how such a thing could be, let me touch on 4th dimensional space a moment. You are probably familiar . . . or maybe not . . . with the three dimensions of space — x, y, and z — which are mathematical representations of the perpendicular dimensions of length, width, and depth. Now into this, let us factor in t, which is time, the 4th dimension, and is perpendicular to the other three. Time is not lineal, but cyclical, looping over itself. Imagine a helix and you'll grasp the general idea. Before Einstein's Theory of Relativity, according to classical mechanics time was an absolute, but we now understand it to be fluid.

What does this have to do with anything? Well, when you passed through said vortex, you were actually passing through the Fourth Dimension. The dimension of time. Though the actual travel time through fourth dimensional space seemed minute to you . . . you will recall the sudden lack of air, the momentary derangement of gravitational forces as you passed through . . . probably seconds or minutes at most in your memory, thousands of years may have passed on earth or time may not have passed at all. It may have moved in reverse from your point of entry. Anything is possible.

Trust me, I am doing my utmost not to bore you to tears with celestial mechanics and quantum theory.

Where are you? You are in another spatial dimension, possibly a fractal which, according to non-Euclidian geometry, cannot be assigned a whole number. It would be represented not as the third, fourth, or fifth dimension, but as the 3.5 dimension or the 4.1 dimension etc. At any rate, as I said, you are in a spatial dimension far from home. How far? So very distant it probably could not be measured even in parsecs. Yet . . . through 4th dimensional space . . . quite close. Einstein explained in his Theory of Relativity that dimensions or worlds could exist side by side, yet be invisible to one another because they occupy different planes of space. But why are they invisible? Probably for the same reason that if you were suddenly transported to, say, the 5th dimension . . . and you may be there now . . . you would not be aware of it. Why? Because you are a three-dimensional creature who is designed by evolution only to detect the three dimensions of length, width, and depth. You do not have the necessary sensory apparatus to detect anything else. Confused? Excellent. Now this spatial dimension or fractal that you are in is a universe unto itself. In that, yes, you are on a planet which no doubt circles an alien star in some unknown void of space. Likewise, this star . . . though I've never seen it through the cloud cover, but do feel its heat . . . is part of a galaxy which is part of a universe in some deadend space that can probably only be represented mathematically. You've probably seen our two moons, but I believe there is a third. My studies of the orbital paths of the other two suggest a third satellite. No matter. We are on a planet with moons and a star somewhere out there. The day here lasts anywhere from seventy-two to ninety-three hours, the night thirty-six to forty-five. This anomaly may be in flux due to the unstable field of this dimension or due to seasonal changes or, perhaps, because that time in this place is distorted from what we know.

But you're probably asking yourself how one dimension can possibly link with another. To understand how such things can exist, let us picture the birth of the universe — the so-called Big Bang. Evidence suggests that the universe as we understand it was born out of what physicists call a "singularity". A speck of infinite density occupying zero volume. Boggles the mind, don't it? Now in the first split-second of the Big Bang, this point of infinite density — which contained all the mass and energy that would become the universe-underwent an exponential diffusion or expansion, an inflation of sorts. This diffusion or explosion created matter, time, space, energy, everything known and more that aren't. Now this primordial explosion is not simply three-dimensional, but multi-dimensional, and thus creates not only our universe, but all of multi-dimensional space in one fell swoop. This explosion or implosion, would create an endless number of spatial dimensions . . . those of real space and those of hyperspace.

Now, if you are from the "modern" world . . . I use this loosely, as I left earth as such in 1983 . . . then you are familiar with black holes. A black hole or "singularity" is created when a large star exhausts its nuclear fuel and implodes, collapses into its own intense gravity. This singularity becomes a sort of matter-energy whirlpool which sucks in anything, even light, and cycles it somewhere else. It may implode on our end, but explode open somewhere else. These singularities, in essence, may become wormholes, passages from one spatial dimension to another. Many cosmologists believe that the known universe is but one of countless parallel universes, sort of like an unknown number of soap bubbles suspended in mid-air. Normally, these universes or dimensions would be out of reach of one another, but according to Einstein's equations, there may be a series of tubes or channels — wormholes — that connect these universes. Technically, these wormholes would be called Einstein-Rosen bridges, tunnels that connect two distant spheres of time-space. And you, my friend, have proven their existence for you have passed through one!

Wormholes. According to the most radical and theoretical particle physics of my day, these wormholes would be composed of a sort of exotic matter, a "negative matter" which is not antimatter, in case you were wondering. This negative matter would possess a naturally powerful antigravity field and it would be this field that would hold these wormholes open forever or for short periods of time. Let me give you the classic wormhole analogy to illustrate this. If the universe was a pear, say, then an ant wanting to travel from the front to the back would have a long trip ahead of him, but if a worm had tunneled through the pear, then the ant could take the shortcut. And, essentially, wormholes are just that: time-space shortcuts.

Now, to simplify things, from here on in, where we are is called Dimension X (to borrow the name of an old radio show). Now I believe that an infinite number of these wormholes were created during the Big Bang. Some have closed up and others are still open and new ones are being created by star implosions all the time. Regardless, even those that have closed are as precarious as earthquake fault lines, in that a certain combination of forces can rip them back open as easily as a poorly-mended hem. Here, in Dimension X, where the energy field is somewhat unstable, these wormholes are something of a naturally-occurring phenomena much like tornadoes. When the proper atmospheric conditions exist, an energy flux of some type here opens one of these wormholes . . . sometimes to our planet and probably sometimes to many others. So, if

you can imagine our dimension and Dimension X lying side by side, grids of a sort composed of perpendicular lines, then you can understand that now and then these lines would, simply by random chance, line up, become parallel to one another and maybe it would be this, more than anything else, that would weaken certain areas of space so that wormholes would be sort of an inevitability.

Okay, so you've passed through a wormhole, you've experienced what could be called interspatial teleportation through interspace. You have passed from one spatial cycle to another without having to transverse the limitless space itself. If you've been paying attention and I hope you have, then you realize that the shortest distance between two points is through the 4th dimension. Instead of climbing over a mountain or going around it, you tunneled straight on through. You've bypassed the curves. What the vortex did was to propel you like Captain Kirk and his warp drive. Hyperdrive, would be the actual term, passing through the curves of limited three-dimensional space by dropping out of it and then back in somewhere else.

Now what? Well, you've made the trip, can you make the trip back? Theoretically, yes. You can return. It will be a matter, I think, of returning to your stepping off point into this world. Which I am certain is somewhere in what I have called the Sea of Mists (see my chart). It really will be a matter of waiting for the wormhole to open and being in the right place at the right time. If it opens, using a boat or plane, I think you can punch your way back through. But, by all means, do not enter a wormhole in any other geographical location or you will find yourself God-knows-where. If my theory is correct, the wormhole that brought you here . . . all of us here . . . will only open in that locality. Now beware of one thing. If you are lucky enough to pass through to our world, consider the time distortion factor. Einstein discovered that gravity and other forms of linear acceleration can cause a distortion in the curvature of fourth-dimensional time-space. Essentially, this acceleration can bend time. And you, my friend, accelerated through hyperspace at an impossible speed . . . well, you may be in for a surprise. What may happen is what's known as temporal stasis or the slowing down of time. You may return to the world you knew or you may return a million years in the past or future. It's impossible to say. Conversely, the bending of time may counteract itself when you pass back through.

Again, I'm just guessing.

This brings my little sermon to an end. Once again, I am traveling to the Sea of Veils, to the Lancet. *Because what the three of us — Imab, Betydon, and myself — discovered there, was revelatory indeed. When I say that the Lancet is the key, I know of what I speak. If we had had more time . . . well, no matter. I will go up there again. To satisfy my own scientific curiosity, if nothing else. For that ship holds secrets. And it is, I believe, the focal point for what caused the horrible deaths of Imab and Betydon. For, if you have been here any length of time, you may have felt the presence of another. What this thing is, I cannot say, only that I believe it to be destructive and sentient. Something that may lie dormant or inactive for extended periods of time. A sort of potential energy waiting to spend itself. Lately, I've felt it building. I believe it is about to become kinetic.*

God help us, God help any creature with a conscious, reasoning brain when that happens.

I will die, perhaps. But I will die knowing. Not just the nature of that thing

(something that boggles the mind), but of the secret of the Lancet. *For there, I think, are the keys to deliverance from this place.*

This, then, is my mission. I leave you this letter, my chart. Help yourself to my gun and supplies. For I no longer will need them. Please, do not come after me.

May God protect you,
John R. Greenberg

That is where the letter ended.

Cushing stood there, amazed and informed, depressed and confused, feeling a great many things. Maybe there was hope now and maybe there was a complete lack of it. There were certainly a lot of questions he needed answered and, unfortunately, this Greenberg . . . the Hermit . . . was not there to answer them.

"What do you know about this guy?" Cushing asked Elizabeth.

She just sighed and shook her head. "He was a crazy old man who didn't like people. My Uncle knew him . . . visited him sometimes . . . he was out of his head."

"Maybe not."

"We should go," Elizabeth said.

Cushing found himself staring at her. "You didn't want me seeing this, did you?"

She shook her head.

"You knew he was gone?"

"Yes."

"And-"

"And I didn't want you filling yourself with his crazy ideas. I didn't want you to get filled with false hope," she said to him, "because it is false."

It was confession time. She told him her Uncle Richard had been something of an acquaintance of the Hermit. That he believed implicitly in the Hermit's science. Uncle Richard spent days on end trying to find that vortex that would carry them out.

"But he didn't find it?"

She shook her head. "No. He never did . . . and it broke something in him. Destroyed something in him. Made him give up. That's what killed him . . . he had no hope left. None at all."

"And Greenberg never returned from the Sea of Veils?"

"No one ever does." She swallowed. "Can we please leave now?"

Cushing had a fair idea that Elizabeth was not telling him all she knew. The letter . . . it was dated in December. But this December or the last or five past? He knew Elizabeth wouldn't tell him. At least not yet. But for his money, Greenberg had probably only just set out for the Sea of Veils a few months back. He didn't know that to be true, yet he was certain it was.

"Please," Elizabeth said. "We need to go."

Taking the chart, letter, and gun, they did just that.

15

Maybe Gosling's death had shut something down in him and maybe it had opened something else up. George was never able to figure exactly how he felt about any of it. He'd liked Gosling, trusted Gosling, had faith that Gosling would somehow, in the end, get their asses out of there. And now that he was gone? What was left? Sadness? Hopelessness? Maybe even something as crazy and improper as betrayal? Because it was there, all right, that insane sense that by dying, Gosling had abandoned them all. Abandoned them to Cushing's theories and George's own indecision, to Pollard's weird sensitivity and Chesbro's blind faith. That what they had now, was all they'd ever have . . . dead ships and crawling weed and stinking mists and *fear.* Yes, fear. Fear that every decision they made was wrong, that every turn they took was the wrong one, every road leading back into itself, a maze, a hopeless fucking maze. Without Gosling there, without his guiding hand and no-nonsense practicality, they were screwed. Literally.

For Gosling had been important.

Gosling had been necessary.

He was the heat and boiling steam and hot wetness in a pan and, without him, they were just the residue clinging to the lid. Yes, Gosling had been their motion and energy and drive. He kept them going. He kept them sane and together and hopeful. Gosling was the can-do guy, the quit-feeling-sorry-for-your-pussy-ass guy. Get your ass in high gear, boy, or swear to God, I'll kick it there. That was Gosling.

Without him?

Residue.

Just residue clinging to the lid of the pan called the Dead Sea. And who was going to scrape that residue off? Who was going to be the one now to kick this little group of theirs in the ass and get it moving? That was the question and George didn't seem to have any good ideas. In his mind, he could see them unraveling day by day until none of them gave a shit and they became like Elizabeth Castle . . . just beaten and squashed and accepting.

And George thought: Is that what you want? Is that what you really want to become?

And it wasn't.

Gosling was gone, but they had to carry on in his spirit. He would have respected nothing less and nothing less was acceptable. George was thinking about the things Marx and Gosling had been talking about: finding a boat. Something with an engine, something that could plow them out of the weed and back out into the sea itself. Because George had been thinking that very thing himself all along. With a child's simple logic he knew that if you came in through a door, then you had to go back the same way. And maybe it took quantum theory and Einsteinian physics for a certain Mr. Greenberg to arrive at this deduction, but George knew it intuitively.

16

The screaming came in the night.

Except, of course, it was not night really. George had been laying in his bunk, napping, and he had come awake to screaming. His cabin was dim and he stumbled out into the corridor, more than a little confused, his head full of fuzz.

Screaming.

Who in the Christ was screaming?

George made it up to deck shortly after Pollard, both dazed and shocked and they didn't know what. Didn't know what in the hell they were going to be staring in the face this time, only that it would not be good. Could not possibly be good.

"What the hell's going on?" George heard himself say.

Pollard mumbled something incomprehensible and George was right behind him, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps as they scrambled along those salt-whitened decks, trying to locate the screaming.

"There," Pollard said dumbly. "Oh, there . . . *there* . . . "

It was Chesbro.

He was out into the weed about thirty feet maybe from the *Mystic,* in a run of oily, slopping water, stumbling about in the raft as it sank around him, seeming to deflate before their eyes. But it wasn't deflating, it was . . . it was coming apart. It was fraying and shredding and collapsing. That dirty water around it was spraying up in gouts and boiling in foam.

"Christ, we gotta do something," Pollard was saying.

And George knew they had to, too, but what? They had no boat to get to him and what in the fuck was he doing out there anyhow? But George could pretty much put that together. The dumb sonofabitch was trying to escape. He'd been in a weird, introspective mood ever since the squid attacked them on the C-130 and now he had simply lost his mind and was trying to escape.

George could see quite clearly now what was happening and it made something in his belly take a sickening, empty roll. The raft was getting hit by things . . . luminous things, like the fish he and Gosling had been hit by. Except these were smaller, fist-sized creatures darting and diving about with such speed you could not get a good look at them. Just shining, glowing little things, perhaps hundreds of them going after the raft, hitting it like sharks in a feeding frenzy, teeth tearing and ripping and biting.

He's a dead man, George found himself thinking.

And Chesbro surely was at that, but George couldn't stand there and do nothing. The idea of leaping out there and helping him was suicidal, those little razor-toothed fish could have stripped a Holstein calf to the bones in minutes.

Pollard was shrieking. Slamming his fists against the rail helplessly, just completely frustrated by it.

George saw a life ring and rope hanging from the cabin bulkhead. It was a waste of time and he knew it. But he pulled it off and Pollard seemed to like the idea. In fact, Pollard yanked the ring right out of his hands and gave it a mighty toss out into the mist. It landed with a splatting sound about four feet from the raft.

Chesbro was wailing.

The raft was disintegrating around him. Even all those multiple buoyancy chambers the engineers had designed into the life raft were no good against those little eating, hungry fish. Chesbro was like a man trapped in a burning room, starting first this way and then that, shrieking and moaning and whimpering. It was probably the most piteous thing George had ever witnessed. The entire stern section of the raft had sunk now, filthy water and slimy weeds sluicing up into the forward section.

He's gonna fall, George thought, *gonna fall and then and then—*

Chesbro slipped and fell, his left leg bicycling in the water just long enough for about twenty of those little fish to find it. His pant leg came apart in fragments that almost looked like blue sawdust spit from a wood chipper. There was a spray of blood — the reddest Technicolor blood George had ever seen — and so many fish converged on his leg that you could no longer see his leg. Just what seemed like a hundred silvery, flapping, chomping bodies, all driven mad by the smell of blood, the taste of blood, the warm saltiness of blood. Chesbro clawed his way back up into the raft and the fish fell away momentarily, except for a few whose tiny, cutting teeth were imbedded simply too deeply. George saw raw meat where those fish had been, punctured and gashed. Then a flash of gleaming white that must have been bone.

"Grab that ring!" Pollard was calling out to him. "Chesbro! Grab that ring! Grab that ring! *Grab that fucking ring you goddamn idiot!"*

His face was red and his eyes were bulging, tears streaking down his face. His fists were gripping the life ring rope and had Chesbro been able to just get a hand on it, Pollard would have probably yanked him fifteen feet with the first pull. Because he was half out of his mind, something in him hot and arcing and violent with the need for action. Any action.

But it was too late for anything.

The raft was not a raft anymore, was looking more like a kid's blow-up pool toy that had deflated. The water was thrashing and those fish were hitting Chesbro from every possible direction, tails flapping and jaws working like the needles of a sewing machine. The water and weeds were red and frothing. Chesbro managed to rise up once, about six of them hanging from his face and they had managed to nearly chew all of his clothes from him. Before he came back down, George noticed with mad hysterical laughter echoing in his head that a pod of them were hanging from his crotch like the remoras on a shark, emasculating him.

There was nothing to do but watch.

That was the really heartbreaking, maddening thing about it all. They could only watch as hundreds of those luminous little fish with their serrated, scissoring jaws reduced Chesbro to a pulped and bitten husk, to a bleeding and stripped thing that looked oddly like a raw and living shank of beef. But you had to hand it to him, you really did. Because Chesbro had a lot of life in him, he was coming apart like the raft . . . a red and gored thing composed of fleshy flaps and folds and scratching bloody digits . . . but he did not die easily.

Pollard had lost his anger now. It was replaced by a sort of frightening, paralyzed shock, his mouth contorted in awe and revulsion. "Gah . . . gah . . . *gahhh,"* he kept saying. "That blood . . . all that blood . . . how can there be so much goddamn blood?

Have you ever in your life seen so . . . much . . . fucking . . . *blood?"*

And George didn't think he honestly had.

Chesbro's face broke above the bloody, boiling water and it had been stripped down to tendons and muscle and they were going fast. He looked up toward the *Mystic,* what remained of his eyes splashed down the basal anatomy of his face in a pink, snotty slime. A mist of seething blood was expelled from his mouth in a cloud and then . . . then he just sank in that luminous sea of tearing mouths. Like meat in a piranha tank, he was divided and peeled and torn until he was just a red-stained skeleton and then nothing at all.

Pollard looked over at George or maybe right through him. Then he turned back, looked down at the red, greasy slick that marked Chesbro's passing, and promptly vomited right down the front of his shirt.

And George was thinking, *oh, Chesbro, oh Jesus Christ I'm so sorry I never ever meant to hit you oh my Christ . . .*

And then he felt himself sliding down the railing to the deck, empty. Just completely empty and so numb, so cold and frozen he thought he might shatter if someone touched him.

And then there were three, he thought.

17

When Cushing came back, he knew something had happened.

Maybe it was the atmosphere on the *Mystic,* which was positively tense and guarded, worn just as thin as an old blanket. If Cushing, coming down the ladder into the main cabin, had to put a name to it, it would have been *apocalyptic.* Because it was there on everyone's face: doom and gloom with an extended forecast of dread. Pollard was just sitting there and so was George, both looking pale and despondent.

Cushing knew it was something more than Gosling's death.

Whatever it was, it was recent. The wound still open and bleeding. It hadn't even had the chance to scab over yet.

"Okay," he said, leaning in the doorway. "What now?"

Pollard and George looked at each other, maybe both hoping the other one would put it into words. Pollard finally just looked down.

George cleared his throat, said, "Chesbro . . . he's dead." He paused, swallowed something down. "I think he was trying to escape in the raft . . . it got torn up and him with it."

George gave him the quick version and from what he said and what Cushing could see in his eyes — a simmering black horror — he was glad he had not seen it. He'd seen plenty of bad by that point, but this he could do without.

"Well, I guess . . . I guess it was his own fault." It was cold and cutting, but Cushing did not retract it. Did not even consider doing so. He pulled something out of the duffel bag hanging at his side: a fifth of Jack Daniels. He tossed it to George. "Looks like you guys need one."

George's eyes lit up. He broke the seal and threaded off the cap, took a good pull off it. Pollard practically fell off the settee trying to get a taste himself.

After he had, he just shook his head. "Fucking civilization," he said, the whiskey filling him with something that had long been missing.

Cushing smiled, dug a carton of cigarettes from his duffel. "Here, George. Bad for your health, they say, but piss on it."

George's eyes lit up. "Cigarettes? No shit. My perverse addiction thanks you." He fired one up and smiled. "Oh baby, oh yeah."

"Goddamn junkie," Pollard said. He took the pack and fired one up himself. "I'm supposed to be quit . . . can't see it mattering now."

"Where's Elizabeth?" George said, blowing out smoke. "Aunt Else has all but accused me of kidnapping her."

"She's coming," Cushing said. He cocked his head. "You sure as hell aren't gonna believe what she found."

They heard her coming down the steps, saw her enter the cabin. She offered Pollard the thinnest of smiles and gave George the obligatory death-stare. He winked at her. Maybe she didn't like him and his mouth much, he figured, but she understood him. Understood him just fine. She stepped aside and four men stepped in behind her.

"Jesus H. Christ!" George said, jumping to his feet. "I can't . . . holy shit!"

Pollard was up, too.

They both looked like they were seeing ghosts.

But there was nothing spooky there, just Menhaus, Fabrini, Saks, and Crycek. And for all them, it was like the ball had just dropped at midnight on New Year's Eve.

Saks gave him his porcine, wicked smile. "Well, can't say I'm surprised, George, figured you and Cushing were holed up somewhere swapping spit."

That made George laugh. Didn't seem like he could stop. "Yeah," he gasped, "but the whole time we were thinking of you, Saks."

"Shit," he said.

George shook hands with Fabrini, his favorite muscle-bound Italian. Fabrini looked so glad to see him, he had tears in his eyes. And Menhaus? Same old Menhaus. Thinner, certainly, more lines on his face . . . but the same old Menhaus.

"Jolly Olly," George said and they hugged, slapping each other on the back.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you guys."

"Glad to see us?" Menhaus laughed. "Shit, after . . . what? A week with Saks here? We're definitely ready for some human company."

Fabrini chuckled.

Saks laughed despite himself. "And after all I've done for you."

"Or *to* him, don't you mean?" Fabrini said, very little humor in his words.

"Kiss my ass, Fagbrini."

There was tension there, but it faded about the time the bottle started making the rounds. Jokes and insults passed around like cold germs. Cushing said very little, though there was plenty he wanted to enlighten them on. But not yet. Not now. Not until they settled in.

Elizabeth just stood there, looking uncomfortable like she'd just wandered into a men's club. The talk was both salty and spicy, the language a little rough. She looked a little surprised and taken back by it.

Cushing figured she wasn't used to it, but with this bunch, she'd have the chance. That was for sure. Fabrini kept looking at her as if he just didn't believe there could be something like a woman. But every time she looked in his direction, he averted his eyes like a shy schoolboy. Not so with Saks. He was eyeing her up and down like she was fresh off the grill and he was hungry. Like maybe he wanted to stuff an apple in her mouth and cut himself a slice. She saw it, too. It was hard not to. And the look she gave him . . . well, Cushing figured Saks was lucky she didn't have a gun in her hand.

Gradually, the talk turned to more serious matters.

It was confession time. What happened and to who and what the hell did you do when the ship went down? Then it seemed like everyone was talking at once.

"Soltz?" Menhaus asked.

George just shook his head. "No. What about Cook?"

Menhaus shook his head this time.

Pollard was filling Crycek in on their shipmates. "Yeah, Marx . . . the chief. Squid got him and Gosling, too."

"The First? Oh, shit," Crycek was saying. "Not the First, not the First."

George sketched basically what had happened to Gosling and Crycek told him about someone named Hupp, that George did not know. Whoever it was, you could see that Crycek felt the pain of his loss as he felt the loss of Marx and Gosling.

Saks was the only one unmoved by any of it.

He seemed oddly at ease with it all. But maybe that was because the gears were already turning in his head. Gosling would have definitely stood in his way, but without him? Maybe there was still hope to rein this bunch in.

All in all, the stories that passed now were grim. They had all survived the seaweed sea and its innumerable terrors. And you could tell by the way they told those stories that they knew damn well that none of it was over with just yet.

About that time, when there was a lull in the horror story competition as it were, Elizabeth announced. "You men must be hungry. I'll get you some food. Will you help me, Mr. Cushing?"

That got Saks laughing. *"Mister* Cushing. I like that."

Cushing smiled and went into the galley with her. He had things to say and George could see that, but he wasn't ready just yet.

When the door was closed to the galley, Saks said with his usual subtlety, "Cushing? He banging that shit?"

"Jesus Christ, Saks," Fabrini said.

George just laughed. Saks. Always the sentimentalist. "Could be. She's taken a real shine to him. She's okay, Saks, don't give her a hard time. Wait till she brings out the food . . . better than that survival shit."

George explained to them how Elizabeth was something of a professional scavenger. All the food she had stockpiled, the garden she had growing on a barge somewhere.

"Jesus," Menhaus said, rubbing his hands together. "Real vegetables . . . sweets . . . goddamn bacon and bread, you say?"

"Well, don't be in any hurry, Menhaus," Saks said. "Cushing's probably putting the meat to her right now."

"They always go for the big Viking types, don't they?" Fabrini joked.

Saks grinned. "Maybe we need to put more men on the job. Maybe I better go in there, show dumbfuck Cushing how it's done."

"Maybe you better just keep it in your pants, Saks," George warned him. "This lady is tough, she don't fuck around. You keep it in your pants or she'll cut it right off. Trust me."

"Listen to you," Saks said. "You even got a dick, George?"

"Your wife thinks so."

Saks flushed, looked like maybe he might go after George, but he kept it in check, offered up a little hollow laugh. And maybe his laugh was hollow, but Fabrini's wasn't . . . it was loud and booming. Menhaus was laughing, too. You could see that Saks didn't like that. You didn't go around laughing at Al Saks.

"Now listen to me," George said. "I'm not trying to give you shit, Saks, but you've got to remember a few things here. This woman is letting us stay here and she don't have to do that. And don't give me that ah-she's-just-a-fucking-broad look. This girl is tough. She's a survivor. She knows how to survive. You cross her and you'll find out. She's been living here for years, fighting to stay alive. You think for a minute she won't slit your throat she sees you as a threat, guess again. Leave her be. That's all I'm saying. She likes Cushing and that's the way it is. He gets some and you don't, too damn

bad. Go fuck your hand. Because you get out of line and you might screw it up for all of us. And I tell you what, Saks, I won't put up with it."

"Oh, you won't?"

George gave him back his look. "No, I won't. You don't think so, try me."

Fabrini was eating it up. Menhaus just looked tired by it all. Like maybe he'd been living on a steady diet of this kind of shit and the only thing it did now was fatigue him.

Saks smiled then, because it was all a joke, couldn't they see that? Cushing was throwing the pirate-girl the old bone? More power to him. It was okay with Saks; he wasn't the sort of guy to shit on a romance. "Okay, George," he said, very calmly. "Don't get your pecker hard, I was just kidding around."

"Sure," Fabrini said, touching the bandage at his ear. "Saks is like that. He'll kid you right to death. See if he don't."

And, damn, what passed between those two . . . it wasn't good. Like homicide put on ice, George was thinking. He didn't need Menhaus spelling it out for him, because he already had a pretty good idea of what it had been like in that lifeboat. Saks and his mouth. Fabrini and his short fuse. It must have been really something.

"Well, Captain," a voice said, "I see you've wasted no time in inviting your drunken cohorts aboard?"

Aunt Else. Fresh from her nap and ready to charge. She looked over the new faces and grimaced, apparently wasn't caring much for what she was seeing.

"Who's the old bag?" Saks said, around the back of his hand.

George made a quick round of introductions, but Aunt Else wasn't exactly listening. Her eyes were sharp, but her mind was dull and drifting. She had, no doubt, already assigned Saks, Menhaus, Fabrini, and Crycek roles in her fantasy and that was enough for her.

"So, what now?" Fabrini said. "We're all here-"

"And some of us are queer," Saks said.

"Queer? Queer?" Aunt Else was looking over at the bar. "There's a great many things queer, I would think. I'm finding this entire voyage queer. I'm finding your actions, Captain . . . or lack of them . . . certainly queer."

"You tell him, sister," Saks said, enjoying it.

She turned and looked at him. "I find you extremely queer, sir."

Fabrini burst out laughing. "Yes, ma'am, old Saks . . . he's as queer as they come."

"I should say so," she said.

George nodded. "Without a doubt. Good Mr. Saks was in the Navy, you know. I'm certain he was doing a lot of queer things in there. Tell us about it, Saks, tell us how queer you were in the Navy. I bet you were about as queer as they came. Yes, our Mr. Saks, he's a queer sort, all right."

Menhaus was giggling. "Queer. I like that. *Queer.* She's saying and you're saying and . . . ha, ha, that's pretty good."

"Shut the hell up, you moron," Saks told him.

"Like I was saying," Fabrini began, "we're all here . . . what now? Where do we go from here? We got ourselves a nice base here, but I'm not about to kick my feet up and take root."

"Oh, you'd take any root offered," Saks said.

George shook his head. Christ, it was like being in the tenth grade locker room. Maybe not even that sophisticated, you came right down to it.

Fabrini went on. "We have to make plans. I don't know what comes next, but we have to be ready. And we have to think about getting out of here."

"Captain, will you please tell your subordinates to lower their voices?" Aunt Else said. "I'm working on something vital here and I can't be disturbed." She held up a book, shaking it at him. "This is a legal manual I have here and I am currently putting together the case against you."

George saw that it was a romance novel with some woman on the cover busting out of her bodice. It was okay, though, there was some big Fabio-looking stud there to tuck things back in for her. Thank God.

Saks said, "Yeah, that Captain George . . . he ain't much, ma'am. I'm about ready to mutiny here. What a mess he got us in. Captain, sir, you ain't worth a happy fuck."

George winced, wondering what kind of outburst profanity would bring from Aunt Else, but she was studying her legal manual. That was the way she was, though. She only seemed to hear fragments of conversations, the rest went out the window. She filled in the blanks as she saw fit.

Menhaus took a sip of whiskey. "Saks . . . you should watch your language, you know. We're not out on the dock here."

Saks slapped his knee. "Captain George? I sure as hell hope there isn't an Uncle Else, because Menhaus is popping wood over the old bat."

"Okay," George told him. "That'll do."

"Sure, sure, Captain. Don't throw me in irons or nothing."

George was getting his fill of Saks real fast here. "Oh, I won't. At least, not yet. As long as you're a good little sailor-boy, I won't have to do anything unpleasant. But I'm a hard master, so don't cross me."

It was a joke, but maybe not much of one. Maybe George was saying certain things without actually saying them.

"I can't believe, Captain, that after all of this, you would still behave like such a terrible brute. Throwing your weight around and threatening your men," Aunt Else said. "Have you learned nothing from any of this? Generally, I stay out of the affairs of men, but this has gone far enough. You've been hard enough on that poor boy as it is . . . just look at him! Dear God, he's frightened of you."

Fabrini barked a laugh.

George just shook his head. "I'll be gentle."

"See that you are."

"You'll protect me, won't you, ma'am?" Saks said. "You won't let him beat me or do any of those other awful things he likes to do?"

But she was gone again, scribbling with a pencil in her book. Throwing together an unimpeachable case against Captain George. At least it seemed that way until she looked up and said, "I'm afraid you'll hang, Captain."

"Damn," George said.

"Don't be swearing in front of the lady," Saks warned him.

"Shut up."

Aunt Else slammed her book down. “This has gone far enough! I won’t have you bullying the men! Do you understand me? My husband will have a thing or two to say to you when he returns. Mark my words, Captain.”

“You better listen to her, Captain Bligh,” Saks said to George. “You can’t go on treating us like this.”

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” Menhaus said. “He can’t help that big mouth and small brain of his.”

“I don’t see where this is any of your affair, Doctor,” Aunt Else said. “As I recall you were invited as a guest, not to stir up trouble in general. Why, I’d be surprised if your degree is even from a reputable university.”

“Me, too,” Saks said.

“This place . . . it’s goddamn crazy,” Crycek said. “Well, you ought to fit right in then,” Saks told him.

Crycek didn’t say anything to that. But George could see it wasn’t just some off-handed jibe. There was more to it than that. A lot more. Crycek had that dazed, scared look in his eyes much like Pollard had when he first met him. He’d seen something that he just couldn’t get past.

“Crycek thinks there’s a boogeyman out in the fog,” Saks said.

“Knock it off,” Fabrini told him.

Crycek wouldn’t even look at any of them. He sat there with Pollard, looking almost queasy that any of it had been brought up in the first place. He buried his face in his hands like he wanted to cry.

“See?” Saks said. “He’s having one of his headaches. You know what that means? That means that the *thing* out there is getting at him again. Right, Crycek? It’s trying to eat your mind again?”

George reached over and yanked the whiskey bottle from Saks’s hands. “I think you’ve had enough of that on an empty stomach.”

Saks rose in his seat an inch or two, his face red as a ripe tomato. “You do that again, Captain George, and I’ll break that bottle right over your fucking skull.”

Fabrini was ready. “Why don’t you try it, Saks? Because whatever part of you George don’t stomp, I will.”

“I think you’re all forgetting why you’re here,” Aunt Else said. “This is a court of law and you should all behave in accordance. Let’s try and act civilized here. We know who the guilty man is. Let us come together on that.”

George kept watching Saks, trial or no trial. “What makes you think there *isn’t* something out there, Saks? C’mon, regale us with your wisdom.”

But Saks wasn’t biting. “Because Crycek is crazy. He’s a nutjob and that’s all there is to it. You got to be crazy to believe shit like that, Captain.”

“Then you haven’t felt *it?”* George put to him.

Everyone was watching them now. Everyone but Aunt Else. They were all watching and listening, wanting, maybe, to have this subject broached. Something they had all thought of, but didn’t dare speak of.

“I haven’t felt shit.”

George just nodded his head. “Well, I have. And I’ve felt it more than once. Go ahead, Saks, smile like an idiot. But you’ve felt it just like we have, only you don’t have

the guts to admit it. But that's okay . . . because I don't know what's out there, but something is. And that something? That devil or boogeyman, it believes in *you,* Saks. You better believe it does."

"Crazy goddamn shit," was all Saks would say. "Kiddie stories."

"You really think so?" George looked over at the others, one by one. "How about the rest of you? Any of you agree with Saks? You think there's nothing out there in that mist but weeds and bones and crawly things? Any of you honestly believe that? No? I figured as much. Guess that makes you the odd man out, Saks."

Saks stood up. "Pussies," he said. "You're all a bunch of fucking pussies that are afraid of your own goddamn shadows. I don't believe in any devil. Not here, not back home. There ain't no such thing as a devil."

"Oh, but there is."

Cushing had come out of the galley and there was a tone in his voice that told them he was not kidding around. "It's out there, Saks. And it's not some half-ass Christian oogy-boogey man with a pitchfork and horns, it's the real thing and it has plans for us. You can believe that." He sighed, looked around. "But enough of that. Let's eat, then we'll get down to business."

18

Business, then.

They were all sitting there and the whiskey was gone and now there was just coffee and bloodshot eyes. Some of the men were smoking. George and Saks and Pollard were studying the chart of the ship's graveyard and environs beyond that Greenberg had drawn. Crycek was looking over the letter Greenberg had written. Cushing had the floor and he was pacing back and forth saying, "So, like I said, this Greenberg . . . the guy Elizabeth knew as the Hermit . . . he was one of a group of scientists that got sucked in here because they wanted to. They believed all along that those planes and ships and people in the Devil's Triangle and Sargasso Sea were getting funneled *somewhere.* They just weren't sure where.

So, somehow . . . who knows . . . they got themselves pulled in here same way we did."

Saks looked up from the chart. "So these eggheads, they worked for the Navy at one time? Part of something called Project Neptune?" He shook his head. "You expect me to believe that the Navy wastes time on shit like this?"

"They wasted time on the Philadelphia Experiment, didn't they?" Pollard said. "Who knows what kind of crazy shit our government is up to?"

"Philadelphia Experiment? What the hell is that?" Saks waved it away like he didn't honestly care. "You telling me our government knows about this shit and don't do nothing about it? I can't buy that. You buy this shit, George?"

But George didn't say; he just studied the chart.

Fabrini laughed. "You're naïve, Saks. You know that? You think those politicians ever tell the truth? All they do is lie and cover-up shit."

Menhaus said, "You won't get Saks to believe that, Fabrini. He believes whatever those lying shits tell him. Blind faith."

Saks slammed his hand down on the table. "Menhaus, you're a fucking idiot and we all know it. I don't believe anything those lying fuckwigs in Washington say. I was in Vietnam, dipshit, I know all about lies and cover-ups. Don't you be telling me what I believe, because you don't have a clue."

"All right, already," George said. "We're not talking politics here. We're listening to Cushing. Maybe if you all shut up long enough he can say what he's got to say."

There was no argument about that.

"Point is," Cushing said, "that these scientists got themselves trapped in here same as us. They know something about this place and how it can exist. Greenberg called it Dimension X and that's good enough. We're stuck on some rotting, misty world on the dirty backside of Dimension X . . ."

He went on to cover pretty much what was in the letter and Greenberg's theories about wormholes and interdimensional passage. It was heavy, heady stuff, but Cushing tried to explain it as simply as he could. Even he, with his scientific leanings, was pretty confused about it all, he admitted. But it all made sense in the long run, he told them. Greenberg explained how they got here and maybe, just maybe, how they could get back out.

"Sure," Fabrini said. "But if what Elizabeth here says about her uncle is true, well, what chance have we got? He looked for that vortex to open and it never did. So where does that leave us?"

"You're missing something, though," Crycek said, pointing at Fabrini with the letter. "In here, Greenberg says that he's going back to that ship, that *Lancet,* says that it's the key. That it's the key to deliverance from this place."

"That's right," Cushing said. "The *Lancet.* What Greenberg referred to as a cursed ship. I don't know what he means by that, but obviously this ship is important. He doesn't say anything about us waiting around down in the Sea of Mists hoping that vortex'll open. He seemed to think that the only way out was through something on the *Lancet* or through maybe the *Lancet* itself."

"He also said that if we go back through, we might end up in some other time," Saks said. "Maybe that's just some voodoo crazy bullshit, maybe not. If it isn't . . . Christ, who knows where we'd end up?"

"Who gives a shit?" Menhaus said. "I mean, does it really matter? Maybe the time-thing would reverse itself like he said and if it doesn't? Fuck it. The tenth or fifteenth century beats the shit out of this place, way I'm looking at it."

George looked up from the chart when he said that, smiled. That was it in a nutshell, wasn't it? Good old Earth in the good old third dimension beat the shit out of this place any day of the week. For there you had sunshine and blue skies and people and, yes, hope. When you were home, there was always hope. That's how George was seeing it. He wanted his time back, wanted it back in the worst way because he had a wife and a kid, but he'd take earth any way he could get it.

"Okay, Cushing," Saks said. "Since you've appointed yourself as the half-ass expert on this science-fiction bullshit, let me ask you something. That egghead . . . he's talking about time bending or curving or whatever . . . so what happens if we come back two hours before we sailed? We go up to ourselves and say, hey, knothead, don't get on that fucking tub?"

"If we have to."

Cushing explained that all the time curvature business was highly theoretical. He told them about something he'd read once, the "Grandfather Paradox", wherein you traveled back in time and killed your grandfather before he married your grandmother. Hence, your parents would never have been born and neither would you . . . so how could you possibly have traveled back in time? One theory said, he told them, was that time was self-perpetuating, that it would maintain its own integrity. So that at the moment you killed your grandfather, you would cease to exist . . . as would everything that had anything to do with you, your parents, etc. Bam, it was all gone, never happened. It was all pretty much fringe-thinking and open to endless debate. He said that everyone knew the Ray Bradbury story where a guy goes back in time to the Jurassic, steps on a butterfly, comes back to the present and the world has been completely changed by that one insignificant butterfly's death which set up a chain-reaction that totally subverted the future.

"But that's all speculation," Cushing finished by saying. "And we don't have the time to worry about crap like that. What we need to decide is how we're going to go about getting out of here."

"Maybe we can't," Saks said. "Maybe Crycek's boogeyman, maybe he won't let us out."

Maybe it was Saks's attempt at some cruel joke, but nobody thought it was funny. On the subject of that mysterious *other,* they had absolutely no sense of humor.

"The Fog-Devil," George said.

"Good name as any," Cushing said.

"Oh, Christ," Saks said. "Here we go."

But nobody was paying him any attention on that subject anymore. They had all pretty much written off his skepticism as fear. He could not accept such a thing, could not live with the idea of such a thing, hence it did not exist. Simple. George figured it was the same sort of self-denial you had back in the world concerning UFOs or aliens . . . the very idea of such things existing was too much for the human mind, so it denied and ridiculed. Sort of a psychological self-preservation so you could sleep at night and not lose your mind wondering when the little green men might come for you.

Crycek said, "Greenberg talks about that, too, in his letter. How that *Lancet* might be the focal point of this thing."

Which, Cushing said to them, had to make you wonder about that ship and what it was exactly. According to Greenberg it was a cursed vessel, but a place of revelations, too. The keys to deliverance and also maybe the hopping off point of something incalculably dangerous.

"Was it it, though?" Menhaus asked. "What is this *thing?"*

But nobody was even going to hazard a guess on that one. They had ideas in their heads, but they wouldn't speak of them. Not just yet. Maybe it was some sort of alien ghost and maybe it was the very thing that had inspired the idea of Satan on earth . . . and a thousand other worlds.

"Listen now," George said to them. "Right now, it doesn't matter what it is. I've felt it and so have all of you. It's out there and that's enough. I don't know how many times out there in that goddamn fog I felt like I was being watched, felt like something was getting close. I saw things, too. Things that couldn't be. I think the Fog-Devil is responsible for a lot of that."

"I think I'll take a walk until story-time is over," Saks said, getting up. "You run out of ideas, there's the one about the guy with the hook-hand out in lover's lane."

"Sit down, Saks," George said.

"What?"

"Sit . . . down."

"Fuck you think you are, bossing me around?"

George was up on his feet now and so was Fabrini. "I think I'm the guy that's gonna put you on your ass and make you listen whether you fucking like it or not."

"Think you're up to the job?"

"Maybe not. But I'll bet Fabrini is."

Saks sat down. "All right, all right, go ahead. Tell me your fucking spook stories. Hey, Elizabeth? You got any popcorn?"

But if he thought it was some big joke, the cocky grin on his face didn't last too long. Not when George brought out the VHF radio from the lifeboat and set it on the table in front of him. His grin faded and his eyes widened. The blood drained from his ruddy,

unshaven face drop by drop.

"This is bullshit," he managed with little conviction. "Fucking parlor games."

"Let's see," George said. "Let's see what's out there . . ."

Elizabeth helped Aunt Else up. Aunt Else had dozed off now and Elizabeth woke her and helped her to the doorway leading to the cabins. But in the doorway, Elizabeth paused. "You . . . all of you . . . you better think about what it is you're doing, what you might be invoking out there . . ."

Then she left on that ominous note.

George started up the VHF and the air in the cabin was heavy, leaden, so thick you could barely pull it into your lungs. The VHF whined for a moment or two, then there was static, rising and falling as before. A snowstorm of static that reminded George of distant, windy places, stormy and blowing places where there was no escape, but only waiting, solemn and grim waiting. Like maybe outposts on hostile worlds or lonely bases coveted by Antarctic maelstroms. Just that static rising and falling like it was breathing. But the bad thing was, he was almost certain that it was louder than it had been before . . . more palpable, cognizant.

"Sounds . . ." Menhaus began, his voice full of dryness. ". . . sounds like wind blowing through an empty house . . ."

George was thinking that, too. A lonely, loathsome sound of dead places. An eerie sound of wind blown through hollow gourds and catacombs. You kept listening, though, listening to that rushing, angry field of static, you started hearing other things, sensing other things.

"Makes my fucking skin crawl," Menhaus admitted.

George was with him on that. For his skin *was* crawling. The static was the sound of voids and distance, black fathomless zones and dead moons. The noise a haunted house would make when no one was there to listen to it. Just that thrumming, listening static that was not entirely lifeless, but not living either. Sterile, unborn, thinking about birth. It got right inside your head and made something in you flinch and curl-up. George knew if he was stuck in a room by himself listening to it for any length of time, he would have put a gun in his mouth.

"Okay," Cushing finally said, almost startled by the sound of his own voice. "Broadcast, George. Put your voice out there . . ."

But George hesitated. The idea of his voice being sucked into that storm of skeletal, dead air was almost too much for him. Like maybe, whatever was out there making that noise, would reach out through the receiver and pull him in.

The static suddenly changed in pitch or something out there did. There came a muted beeping like a Morse Code key being frantically tapped. At first he thought he was imagining it and then he was certain he was: because there was a voice out there speaking, but lost in that field of static. Gradually, it became clearer and it was a man's voice, garbled and lost, but you could hear it, all right. A high-pitched, almost whimpering sort of voice. *" . . . out there, out there . . . out there, out there . . ."* Then it faded, echoing in the static, coming right back again like it had bounced off something. *"out there . . . please, please, please . . . don't come after us . . . don't follow us . . . dear God don't follow us . . ."* And then it dropped back down into the static again and everybody in the cabin found their lungs and started to breathe again. And this time

another broadcast came up, but just for a second or two. A woman's voice now, desperate and insane-sounding, whispering over the mic: *" . . . help us . . . help us . . . help us . . . help us . . ."* Yes, just a whisper like she was afraid someone or something might be listening to her.

"Turn it off," Saks said, breathing hard. "Turn that shit off."

But George didn't. He clicked on the mic, said, "This is an SOS . . . this is an SOS . . . this is an SOS . . ."

Then he clicked it back off and the effect was immediate. The static got louder, became something akin to the buzz of hornets and there was that weird, echoing ping buried in it, coming and going and sounding very much like the pinging of a sonar unit, only oddly hollow and alien-sounding.

Cushing nodded and George shut it off, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Now," Cushing said. "What you're hearing out there . . . that noise . . . it's not of natural origin and we all know it. The only time that buzzing or pinging rises up is when you put your voice out there. Something, something out there reacts to it."

Pollard was shaking. "Those people . . . those poor, lost people . . ."

"Those people are long dead," Cushing told him. "Those are just echoes of old broadcasts I'm willing to bet, but in this place, somehow they keep repeating."

He let everybody relax a moment before he went on and by then Elizabeth was back. She sat over on the settee by Crycek and Pollard. She didn't say a word. She looked disturbed by what they were talking about, but wouldn't say so.

"All right," Cushing said. "Greenberg knew this thing existed, he felt it the same way we've all been feeling it out there. Though he doesn't say so, I think we can read between the lines and say that this thing . . . the Fog-Devil . . . it got his friends when they were at the *Lancet.* Greenberg said he thought the Fog-Devil was cyclic, meaning that it went through periods of dormancy and gradually cycled itself back up from time to time. And I'm guessing that we just happened to drop into this place about the time it's ready to wake back up."

Fabrini stood up. "That's right. That's absolutely right. I mean, think about it . . . why aren't there more people here? Christ, should be lots of people here. We survived and they should have, too. Where are they? What happened to them?"

"They were purged," George said, jumping in.

Everyone was looking at him now.

"I don't have a better word for it, people. Whenever that Fog-Devil wakes up, goes kinetic like Greenberg said, then it goes hunting minds, human minds. And the next time it comes, none of us'll be left."

"Oh, Jesus," Menhaus said.

Fabrini was scared. You could see that. But he wanted to say something and he did: "When we were on the *Cyclops,* Cook and I found the ship's log and . . ."

He told them what he remembered about it, breaking off again and again and saying how he wished Cook was alive, because Cook could tell it better than he could. But he got most of it right. The crew from the *Cyclops* visiting a Danish ship called the *Korsund* and what they found there . . . the burned men, their eyes cremated from their skulls, their brains boiled to jelly. All the horrors of that dead ship. And how what happened there, happened then to the *Cyclops* . . . one man at a time until there was no

one left but the first mate who had gone mad, waiting for the Fog-Devil to come for him. When Fabrini had finished, he was breathing hard, tears in his eyes, and a tic in the corner of his lips.

"I never saw that fucking book," Saks said. He looked to Menhaus and Crycek and they both shook their heads. "Where was it?"

"Cook," Fabrini said. "He tossed it overboard. Did something with it. He didn't want you guys reading it, getting freaked out."

Saks made some derogatory comment under his breath.

Menhaus just said, "Cook . . . he was a good one. A real good one."

"So that gives us an idea of what this thing does," Cushing said to them. "It might be radioactive in nature. Regardless, it's extremely dangerous. If we don't want to be part of the next purge—"

"Then it's time to shit or get off the pot," George said.

"Meaning what?" Saks asked him.

George looked at him, at all of them in turn. "It means, Saks, that we can either head our asses back into the Sea of Mists and hope like hell that vortex opens for us again or we can go up to the *Lancet."*

"That's crazy."

"It's our only chance," Cushing said. "We go up there and find Greenberg if he's still alive or we find out the secret of that ship, find out why Greenberg thought it was the key. Deliverance, maybe."

"And?" Menhaus said.

"Maybe death."

"Well, you girls have fun," Saks said. "Drop me a line from hell."

"He's right, Saks," Menhaus said. "It's our only chance and we got to take it."

They voted on it right then and there and everyone but Saks was in favor of making the trip and taking the chance. Elizabeth voted to go along, too, but she figured it was more to protect Cushing than anything.

"You don't know what that place is up there," she said. "You don't know all the souls that have been eaten up there . . . you have no idea what it is you're going up against."

"Do you?" George asked her.

But all she would do was stare holes through him.

19

Later, when George went up on deck, he found Cushing and Elizabeth up there. His first reaction was to go back below, like maybe he was interrupting something. But he saw he wasn't. They were both leaning on the rail, looking out into the fog.

"Anything going on?" he said.

Cushing shrugged. "I'm not sure."

George started watching, too.

The fog was very thick, thicker than it had been earlier. But it was still day and the mist was still backlit by itself, though heavy and roiling like some crazy fusion of smog, steam, and smoke. A gushing gaseous envelope. You could smell the dankness of it, feel its moisture on your skin like jungle damp.

"What is it I'm looking for?" George said, lighting a cigarette,

"Just wait," Cushing said.

So George waited. Waited and smoked and wondered when the real question would be broached, that of when they were planning on making their pilgrimage up to the *Lancet.* Way he was looking at it, it was something they had to do and soon and also something that might kill them.

"There," Cushing said. "You see it?"

George did, all right. A dull blue glow off in the fog that brightened, flickered for a few moments like a loose light bulb and then vanished. About two minutes later it did it again, then not for another five. Irregular, but artificial-looking. Like maybe somebody was turning on and off a light out there or something, something electrical, was shorting out.

"Like neon or something," George said.

Of course, Cushing was quick to point out that it was more like argon. Electrified neon gas had a reddish glow to it, but electrified argon was blue. And this was definitely blue. "What do you make of it?" George asked him.

But he said he didn't know. "Could be just about anything . . . could even be some weird chemical reaction, you know, some sort of gas mixing with the fog."

But standing there, watching it, George was thinking it was not random. Like maybe it was being directed.

Fabrini came up on deck next. "Well, when are we going to go? I'm in a hurry to get out or die trying." Then he saw that glow out there pulsing. "What in the hell is that?"

George was thinking that a searchlight seen through coastal fog might look like that.

"You don't think it's that . . . that Fog-Devil, do you?" Fabrini asked.

"No," Cushing said. "I don't think so."

George said, "Elizabeth . . . have you seen this before?"

"One or twice in the past few days," she admitted. "But not before, never before."

George could tell from her tone that something about that light was getting her hackles up. It was disturbing her, putting her on her guard, but she didn't seem to know why . . . or want to say why.

"Okay," Fabrini said. "I'm curious. What are we waiting for?"

Cushing shrugged. “Let’s do it.”

20

The blue glow was coming from a freighter.

When they got up close and it came up out of the mist at them, they all felt it down in their guts like some wasting disease, something pernicious and destructive. The ship was just another old derelict listing in the fog, a container ship with great holes eaten through its sides, rusting and silent with weed growing up its hull . . . yet it was so much more. There was something grimly monolithic about it, unhallowed like a moldering tombstone over a heretic's grave or an ancient altar where human sacrifice had been practiced. Whatever it was, it felt like doom and insanity. Tendrils of mist wrapped up its superstructure, oozed and drifted like fingers of ectoplasm.

Go away, the ship seemed to be saying, *this is none of your damn business. Just go away while you still can.*

But they weren't heeding its warning.

They were all there, save for Crycek who had stayed behind with Aunt Else. In Elizabeth's boat, they poled closer to the wreck through the weeds, feeling its weight and ominous pull.

George felt like it had reached out and taken hold of him, held him tightly in a cold fist and would not let him go until it had squeezed all the good, decent, human things out of him.

"Christ," Pollard finally said. "It . . . it gets under your skin, doesn't it?"

Everyone agreed wordlessly.

Even old tough-guy Saks was having trouble pretending there wasn't something, something bad you could feel, smell, and taste.

If ships could go insane, this one had. There was something decidedly wrong about it. Empty maybe, but not untenanted. And how long it had drifted alone and derelict, no one could say. But it might drift for another hundred years or maybe a thousand, a worm-holed, mist-shrouded coffin bobbing in the weed, holding darkness tight in its belly like black earth. A thing of silence and mist and dire memory. If anything called it home, then it could not possibly be sane. Could not possibly be anything you would want to look in the face.

"Boarding ladder's down," Saks said.

"Just like the *Cyclops,"* Fabrini said.

They tied off the scow and went up one after the other. They carried lanterns and flashlights. George carried the .45 that had been Greenberg's. The others had axes and gaffs. Menhaus had a pike.

The decks were covered in slime and mildew, were almost spongy in places. The beams of their flashlights bounced off the heavy fog. The lanterns threw weird, crawling shapes over the bulkheads. That blue glow was coming from this ship. They knew that much. They'd seen it strobing as they approached it, but now they had not seen it in ten minutes or more.

Like somebody turned off the light, George thought.

The idea of exploring another old hulk didn't sit well with anyone, but they had come this far and no one mentioned turning back. The decks were crowded with orange

plastic containers stacked one-high that appeared to be bolted down. They stopped before a row of them.

"What do you suppose all this shit is?" Fabrini said.

The plastic containers held yellow metal drums. In the light of the fog, it was easy enough to read what was stamped on the containers themselves: !RADIOAKTIVE MATERIALIEN DER GEFAHR! GEFAHRLICHE VERGEUDUNG! And beneath that, a symbol for radiation.

"German," Saks said.

Cushing nodded. "Radioactive materials," he said. "Must be barrels of radioactive waste they were taking to dump or store somewhere."

"Oh, shit," Fabrini said.

"Relax, they look sealed," Saks said.

They did, but no one liked the idea of being on a freighter full of stuff like that. It was not exactly reassuring. Especially with that funny blue glow they'd been seeing. Cushing explained what it meant to Elizabeth.

"We better get our asses out of Dodge," Menhaus said.

"Maybe not," Saks said. "Look . . ."

There it was again, that pulsing pale blue glow. It lit up, flickered, painted one of the aft cabins an electric blue. Then it died out again.

"What do you make of it?" George asked Cushing.

"I know what I make of it," Fabrini said. "Some of this shit leaked. That's what we're seeing and we're probably all fucking contaminated now."

"Well, at least your dick'll glow in the dark, Fagbrini," Saks said. "Menhaus ought to get a charge out of that."

But Cushing just shook his head. "Radioactive waste might glow . . . maybe . . . but not like that."

"Let's see what does then," Saks said.

He led them aft, beneath a framework of winches and derricks, around great chasms eaten through the deck plating, and to the cabin beyond. The hatch to the companionway was open.

"Shall we?" he said.

They started down after him, his flashlight beam cutting through the murk, revealing motes of dust and grimy bulkheads, iron steps that were warped and buckled. Near the bottom of that ladder, the blue light pulsed again, casting a ghostly, ethereal illumination over them. They saw it was coming from an open doorway.

George smelled something rank that made his eyes water. The air was thin and dry, rarified like gas in a vacuum tube. It was hard to breathe, but then, maybe it was just panic on his part. His throat felt tight, constricted to a pinhole now. He was smelling something like rotting fish. But other odors, too, hot and acrid smells.

They stepped through the doorway, flashlights and lanterns held before them, weapons at the ready. The first thing they saw was some sort of machine on the floor of what might have been a machine shop once. It sat on a crude frame of welded bars that housed a large oval disk of shiny metal. Above that was something like the scope from a hunting rifle, though three feet in length. Connected to the disk by two-foot rods at either end were two large, circular mirrors set upright . . . at least things that looked like mirrors.

The entire contraption was making a low, humming sound. Charged particles of luminous blue danced across those mirrors, then faded.

Looking at it, George could not say what it was. But it appeared as if that scope-device was lined up dead center of those off-set mirrors. And what could the point of that be?

The machine thrummed again and George could feel the deck vibrating beneath him. The hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. Static electricity crackled in the air and there was a sudden, gagging stench of burnt ozone and fused wiring. Then the machine made a funny whining sound and a transparent pencil-thin beam of light like a laser beam came out of the back end of the scope and struck the rear mirror. The mirror was suddenly suffused with white light, making a sharp sound like rustling cellophane. It glowed and reflected a series of prismatic beams at the front mirror which broke them up into a blue beam of light like a searchlight, directing that blue radiance at the bulkhead. You could see that blue energy crawling, rippling, making the bulkhead beneath seem insubstantial.

Then the scope cut out again.

"What the hell is that?" George said.

And maybe somebody would have answered him, but that's when they saw that they were not alone with the machine. There was something else in that room and it was not a man. What it was . . . they couldn't say at first, it was so utterly alien in appearance. It looked at first like an elongated lizard squatting on its hands and knees, but it was no lizard. It was not anything that anyone had ever seen before. It rose up off the floor, a corded and rawboned thing made of rubbery blue-green flesh. It did not have legs as such, but something like a tripod of stout and boneless limbs ending not in feet but in pads like those of a treefrog.

"Oh my God," Elizabeth said.

"Keep away from it," Cushing said, as if that needed saying.

It had the general body shape of a pond hydra — cylindrical and up-curving like a banana, but hunched and contorted, set atop that tripod of legs that looked more like pythons than legs. It moved back a step and those spade-feet made wet, sucking sounds as they were pulled from the metal deckplates. It stood there, tall as a man, a nightmare sculpted from wrinkled, convoluted flesh with a bony head full of hollows and draws like an irregular, knobby cone pressed flat on top. From which, there was a nest of coiling blue-black tendrils, each as thick as a man's thumb. They could have been some kind of alien hair, but they looked more like bloated worms looking for blood to suck.

"What the fuck is that?" Saks demanded to know.

"I think . . . I think it's the thing that made that machine."

It had three blue-green leathery arms ending in whipping clusters of root-like tentacles that might have been called fingers on some distant world. From throat to legs, there were a series of short, blunt, hollow tubes running down its underside. They looked like sheared-off sections of garden hose . . . but greasy, horribly-alive, twitching. They could have been organs of speech or reproduction for all anyone could say.

And that was the crazy thing about this horror: you couldn't make sense of it. You couldn't look at it and say, yes, it's invertebrate. Yes, it's a worm or a snake or an insect. There was no possible frame of reference for this thing on earth. Its anatomy was

completely alien, its evolutionary biology unguessable.

Now George knew where that revolting, dead fish smell was coming from. But closer like this, it wasn't exactly the smell of dead fish. Like that, but sharper, higher, with an almost gagging chemical smell mixed in.

Everything about the creature inspired revulsion. And the worse part was that it had a face. If you wanted to call it that. A fissured, wizened sort of face with a triangular arrangement of close-set eyes, each pink as strawberry milk, glistening and oozing with mucus . . . all three of them. And each about the size of a tennis ball. But those eyes, they soon saw, were not pink. Not really. There was only a membrane of pink skin over them. Like drapes opening, the membranes pulled away in tandem, slitting open in the center and revealing eyes that were red as rubies. The membranes did not pull back all the way . . . just enough so that the eyes looked pink with a luminous and jellied red slit in them.

And those eyes . . . they sucked the spirit right out of you.

What was to be done?

What really was to be done?

They watched it and it watched them, checkmate.

There was a pair of short, powerful-looking tentacles at its mouth. One to either side like they might have been used in feeding. They were a bright, cobalt blue with pink undersides, tiny razored suckers set into them. The creature stood there, rubbing those tentacles together with a slippery sound like a man stroking his chin, thinking what to do, what to do.

George watched it, noticing now that it was making a sort of shallow, gasping sound and as it did so, those tubes on its underside inflated, then deflated. Sure, it was *breathing.* That's what those things were. Aspirators of some type. Probably not anything like human lungs at all, but more like the book lungs of a spider or maybe the gills of a fish. Organs of respiration that separated breathable gases from the toxic ones. And in this place, George knew, that could have been oxygen . . . but with all the rotting weed out there, it could have been methane, too. Maybe a little of both with some nitrogen mixed in.

Nobody had made any threatening moves on it yet and it had not done a thing to provoke any. But it was coming. If not from the thing itself, then from the people gathered there. You could almost smell it in the air: a hot, seething intolerance for this creature. And you could see it on the faces of those gathered there: an atavistic, marrow-deep race hatred that was involuntary and automatic. This thing did not belong. It was spidery and evil and obscene. It was offensive to the human condition. You wanted to crush it. To kick it. To stomp it. It was an abomination that disgusted you in ways you could not comprehend . . . so it had to die. It had to be purged. It was simply too different to be allowed to live.

No, none of them were truly aware at a conscious level of what they were truly feeling, but it was there. A race memory, an inherited predisposition that was acid in their bellies and electricity in their veins. That communal need to destroy, to kill, to rend for the good of the tribe. *Slay the beast, kill the monster, protect the hive . . .*

And everyone was suddenly very aware of the weapons in their white-knuckled fists, how their muscles bunched and their nerve endings jangled. Those weapons needed to be put to use.

"Let's kill it," Saks said and you had to expect it to come from him first. "Ugly cock-sucker, let's put it down."

And everyone there seemed more than willing to let that happen. They were like the same animal with the same bones and claws and teeth. The same wide, predatory eyes.

But Cushing said, "Now take it easy. Just take it easy. It . . . it must be intelligent. To build something like that."

Menhaus felt his mouth begin to speak: "You . . . you know what it is, don't you? *Don't you?"*

"Yeah," Saks said, his voice hollow-sounding.

"That flying saucer . . . that ship in the weeds . . . that's where it came from."

Cushing didn't even bother inquiring about that one, he just said, "It's smarter than we are . . . it might be able to help us, to get us out of here . . ."

George just stood there, feeling numb and stupid. His body was thick and ungainly like he was stuffed with wet rags or had been shot up with Thorazine. If the thing had moved suddenly, he knew, it would have had him. There was just no way he could have hoped to evade it. Maybe this was from fear and maybe it was the result of that thing looking at him and into him. And he wondered if that wasn't it . . . because with those alien eyes burning into his head like arc lights, he had a mad desire to draw a razor over his wrists.

Those eyes were bad.

Nothing on earth had eyes like that.

Glaring and hateful and insectile. And this was only accentuated by its mouth which was little more than an oval, puckered hole set off to the side . . . like the mouth of an old man without his teeth in. The total effect was that of a wicked, evil alien face.

It stood there, watching them, not directly threatening, but infinitely repulsive. Maybe it *was* intelligent, but it had no right to be so. Not in the thinking of anyone looking at it. The idea of this slinking nightmare being intelligent was like the idea of an intellectual spider or centipede . . . appalling.

Fabrini took a step towards that weird machine and the thing tensed. Those tubes running down its belly shuddered. Something like black saliva ran from them and when it struck the deck plating, it sizzled like butter on a hot griddle.

"I don't recommend pissing it off," Cushing said.

George had to stay his hand now from bringing up that .45 and putting a few rounds into it. Maybe more than a few.

Yes, he was thinking, it *is* intelligent. You can see that. But it's the wrong kind of intelligence. It's not *our* kind, but a profane, blasphemous sort of intelligence. Cold and cruel and arrogant. Looking at it, he was struck by its unflinching superiority, its . . . *arrogance.* Because, yes, it was arrogant. You could see that. It hated them. It hated them with the warped, inborn bigotry and aversion that its entire race felt for lower orders of life.

"We should try communicating with it," Cushing said. "So it can understand we mean it no harm."

And George almost burst out in hysterical laughter. Cushing suddenly reminded him of that dumb scientist in *The Thing from Another World,* the old 1950s sci-fi/horror

flick. The one that tries to reason with the hulking, blood-sucking vegetable man from Mars and gets swatted aside by the bastard for his trouble. This scenario was too much like that. *Mean it no harm?* That was a good one, because George did want to harm it and he knew that, if there weren't so many of his kind around, that hideous Martian or whatever in the fuck it was, would have killed him without a second thought.

Because George was getting a strong vibe from this thing.

Looking at that pissed-off face and those glaring, hating eyes, he was understanding this creature. Yes, it was intelligent and methodical . . . but so was a cruel little boy who pulled the wings off of flies and lit the tails of cats on fire. The intelligence of this thing was like that — tyrannical, sadistic, and maybe more than a little fanatical. That's why it had started when Fabrini took a step too close to its machine. Because it had built it and inferior things like men had no right to touch it. Men were nothing but mice to it, shit-eating apes that belonged in cages with dirty straw. Something to be gawked at or laughed over, but certainly not equals. *So don't be touching my machine, you stupid rutting ape.*

"So, go ahead, Cushing," Saks said, badly wanting to hack the thing to bits, "try talking to that fucking puke. Go ahead. Take us to your leader, you ugly shit."

Cushing opened his mouth, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

It always looked real easy in those old movies, but the reality of such a situation was a little different. This thing was such an angry, grotesque creature that talking to it, trying to reason with it would have been like trying to reason with a spider when you were caught in its web. *Don't sink your fangs in me, okay? Don't suck my blood out and cocoon me up . . . can we agree on that?*

Yeah, it was ridiculous, George knew.

Maybe this thing had harnessed the power of the stars and the secrets of life and death, but there was no hope of communicating with it. Yes, its intellect was vastly superior, but cold and unreasoning. It had a mindless, stupid hatred for any but its own kind. You couldn't barter with such a creature. It got its hands . . . or tentacles . . . on you, most you could hope for was to be dropped into a jar of preservative and labeled or maybe dissected alive. And if it was in a particularly dark mood — it was — then maybe it would yank out your nerve ganglia and prod it with a knife, study your agony with an icy, alien detachment.

Fabrini said, "Fuck this. Let's get out of here. I can't handle that prick looking at me like that . . . looks like it wants to suck my eyeballs out of my head."

And George was thinking, *why don't we just get it over with? We're going to kill it and we know it, so let's just do it already.*

"Let's just go," Elizabeth said, the last sane voice to be heard.

For now the men were moving. Slowly, but moving all the same. And the thing was aware of it, but maybe uncertain as to what to do about it. The men were forming sort of a loose ring around it and its machine. A nauseating, sour stench came off of it and George wondered if it was afraid. If it sensed what was about to happen. It must have felt like a modern man being ringed in by Pliocene apes. So vastly far above them, yet no match for their numbers and brute strength.

It started to move with a writhing, fluid motion. Wiry muscle flexing with a smooth, serpentine grace under that rubbery flesh that was seamed and sinewy like old

pine bark or driftwood. Those tubes on its belly began to undulate, pissing more of that black juice to the deck where it steamed and sizzled. The tentacles at its mouth drew back and apart like the pincers of an ant. And its face . . . dear God, that wrinkled, bony face positively leered. The membranes of the eyes pulled completely back, exposing the glistening red jewels of those eyes themselves.

And nobody seeing those eyes in their multi-lensed, scarlet glory had ever seen such raw, blistering hatred before.

Nothing in the universe . . . or out of it . . . could hate like this monstrosity.

The mouth distorted into a shriveled ovoid like it wanted to scream and those eyes, they narrowed in their sockets, filled with a deranged wrath. If such a thing could go insane with rage, it was pretty damn close.

Pollard was the one who started it.

He didn't mean to. He stepped to the side, maybe trying to get away from that monster and almost tripped over the alien machine. He stumbled, knocked it aside . . . surprised at how very light it was . . . and found his feet again. And you could see the thing's anger consume it like lye. Hot and bubbling and lunatic. The tentacles it had for fingers began to coil and writhe, those tubes on its underside shuddered and the thing began to make noise. It had been silent thus far . . . but now it began to make a sibilant, hissing *sss-sss-sss-sss-sss-sss* sort of sound like that of a rattlesnake preparing to strike. The crazy thing was that the sounds came not from its mouth, but from those tubes that spit acid and sucked air.

Saks said: "Watch it-"

But that's all he got out, because the thing moved. Jumped, slithered, something. It moved in too many directions at the same time and its blue flesh seemed almost plastic and oozing. Nobody noticed in the midst of this that the alien had something like a small cylinder of golden metal in one of its tentacle-hands. By the time it brought it up, it was too late to do anything.

It aimed it right at Pollard.

It was a weapon. What came out of it was not a laser beam like on TV, but a sparking cloud of pale green gas that hit Pollard in a wet mist. He froze-up solid and . . . and in the space of a second or two, his flesh went liquid like hot wax and melted from the bones below. And this almost before he had time to fall over and die. He collapsed in a fleshy, steaming blur and George caught one insane glimpse of his face running from the skull beneath like tallow down a candle stem, his left eye sliding down his chin. Pollard hit the deck like a Halloween skeleton with clipped strings. He folded up in a bony, smoking, bubbling mass.

And George started shooting.

He put three rounds into the thing and it screamed with a high, keening sound, those tubes standing erect for just a moment. It slumped over, pulled itself up, and Elizabeth tossed her machete at it. It struck the arm that held the golden cylinder and with such force it nearly severed it. The cylinder hit the floor. The thing crab-crawled around, like some half-crushed spider, watery green blood spurting from the holes in its hide, its shattered arm, gouts of it pissing across the floor like lime Kool-Aid . . . and the crazy thing was, it had about the same consistency.

And it stank . . . Jesus, stank like spilled bleach.

The men closed in from all sides with their weapons, moving now purely on automatic for it was time to slay the beast, this alien defiler, this absolute violation of all that they knew. Bleeding and damaged, the creature knew it, too. It looked upon them with absolute hostility, those bright red eyes narrowed and hating. Maybe there was horror there, too, or disgust at the sight of those animals that hemmed it in . . . those four-limbed, two-eyed, pink-skinned monstrosities. To it, they were a crawling pestilence that needed to be stepped on, purged. Vile, idiot things with their crude weapons and simple nervous systems. Yes, maybe there was disgust there, but more than that there was simply hatred and rage that these pale apes would dare kill it.

And that's what George was seeing as he leveled the .45 at it again: a cheated fury. For it was a master of time and space and all other life forms were its slaves. Yes, the alien looked on him, scarlet eyes smoldering like electrodes, and George felt his mind boiling to mist. It was so easy for this thing to dominate and crush a single human mind. Maybe even two or three. And it wanted George to know this, wanted him maybe to understand what waited for men at the dark rim of the universe.

Cushing saw what that *monster* was doing to George. Maybe they all saw it. Saw how that awful thing was sucking his mind dry. Cushing, however, did not wait for completion. He swung his axe at the thing, bringing it right down on the crown of its skull, slicing through those blue-black writhing tentacles and splitting open the top of its head. The axe did the job neatly . . . but upon impact, there was a flash and Cushing was knocked senseless on his ass, the axe still buried in its head. The thing let go with a shrill, grating, oddly metallic scream that was pure rage and agony. It sounded like the starter of a car whirring or iron placed against a grinding wheel . . . sharp, piercing, deafening.

Everyone fell away from it as it thrashed and whipped and leaped, more of that green juice spilling from its cloven skull along with a brownish sort of slime. The axe was still in there, the handle hot and smoking now. Saks didn't get out of its way quick enough and one of its tentacles . . . because they were not arms as such, but coiling tentacles . . . lashed out at him, catching him across the knee and he cried out, fell right over. That tentacle had burned right through his pants to the kneecap below.

George put three more bullets into its head, splattering goo and green steaming blood against the bulkheads as the thing twisted in upon itself, screeching and thrashing and whipping, corkscrewing over the deckplates like it had no bones . . . squirming like a salted slug and worming like a leech, then dying, dying with a bellowing, cacophonous scream of violence, frenzy, and absolute dementia. The sound echoed through that steel-plated room and dropped more than one of the thing's attackers to the floor, sick and vomiting from that overwhelming sonic intrusion.

Ten minutes later, there was nothing but the stink of the thing and the survivors standing there looking down at the remains of Pollard and the corpse of the alien. It was just as ugly dead as alive. It was still steaming and smoking. Its flesh was decomposing fast, seemed to be liquefying. Its eyes had filmed yellowed, fallen back in its skull and it seemed to be decompressing, collapsing, fragmenting. The green blood had pooled around it now, its body creaking and cracking, limbs falling free, tentacles curling up like dead snakes. Everything about it was hissing and bubbling.

If it had a soul, they decided, then it must have been a black and cancerous one.

"Pollard," Menhaus kept saying. "Oh, Jesus, look at him . . . oh shit."

There didn't seem much to say about it. Pollard was dead. He had died very quickly, but also quite horribly.

"I'll send flowers," Saks said with his usual compassion.

Menhaus glared at him. "How can you be . . . you're an asshole, Saks. That's all you are. Just an asshole."

"Have I ever denied it?"

The palms of Cushing's hands were badly burned. "When I hit it with the axe . . . Christ, it was like swinging an axe into a live two-twenty line. Knocked me right on my ass. It must've . . . I guess the thing must've carried an electrical charge to it like an eel."

Saks's knee was burned, but it wasn't bad. "Ugly cocksucker," he said. "Looks like Fabrini's mother. Smells like her, too."

"Fuck you-"

"Look," George said. "Look at that . . ."

Everyone was numb and senseless in the aftermath. Elizabeth was bandaging Cushing's hands and fawning over him. Nobody seemed particularly interested in looking at what George was seeing, but they did, all with that same oh-God-what-now look on their faces.

The hindquarters of the alien were shaking. Quivering. The tripod of its snaking legs were trembling. There was a wet, sloshing sound and a puddle of green-gray jelly spread out behind the thing. There seemed to be bubbles, bubbles about the size of softballs trapped in that flux of jelly.

"What . . . what the hell is that?" Menhaus said. "Those things, like . . ."

But they could see what they were like and what they were. All those bubbles were connected by a network of tissue. Not bubbles, but sacs or membranes of transparent, pink skin and inside each one . . .

"Oh, Jesus," Menhaus said in a squeaky voice. "Pregnant, it was pregnant, pregnant . . ."

It was. Birth sacs. A dozen oval birth sacs with grayish-looking fetuses veined with blue. And the worst part, the very worst part is that those fetuses were not dead. They were wriggling and slithering, all those tiny unformed limbs moving and trembling.

Saks got to his feet, hobbled over there. "Ugly little bastards," he said.

He took up a gaff and began squishing them. Ripping open the sacs and smashing what was inside. Elizabeth made a disgusted sound and turned away, as did the others. Saks didn't stop until he was done, going at it like a little boy smashing earthworms after a rain. One of the fetuses splashed out of its sac and undulated sickly at the toe of Saks's boot.

He stepped on it.

George let go with an involuntary shudder at the sound . . . like stepping on a ripe, watery peach.

"So much for higher fucking intelligence," Saks said.

"It *was* intelligent, you know," Cushing said five minutes later. "That creature . . . it was smart. It was intelligent and we killed it, killed its young."

"We were defending ourselves," Menhaus said, still shaken by the sight of those squirming alien fetuses. "What else could we do?"

"Nothing." Cushing shook his head. "Nothing at all."

Saks said, "You wanna feel sorry for it, Cushing, then take a look at Pollard there. Take a good look."

Menhaus clenched his teeth.

"I'm just saying that it was intelligent. That's all," Cushing pointed out.

George said, "I didn't like the idea of killing it either. I don't think any of us did, but it wasn't exactly friendly. You saw that face . . . Jesus, I've never seen such absolute hatred before. Those eyes could burn holes through concrete."

"We should get back," Elizabeth said.

Saks ignored her. "We saw its ship. Part of it sticking up out of the weed . . . looked like a flying saucer. Course, Menhaus thought it was a hovercraft."

Fabrini chuckled under his breath. But it was not a happy sound.

"Bullshit," Menhaus said. "I said it *looked* like a hovercraft. That's all I said."

But Elizabeth didn't seem to care. "Please, let's just go . . . I'm sick of looking at it."

"But something that intelligent . . . just imagine the things it knew," Cushing said.

Saks laughed. "There you go again. If it was so fucking smart, how did it get trapped here like us? You wanna tell me that, Einstein?"

Cushing shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe it was just an accident. Maybe something happened to its ship. That thing . . . a ship like you say, probably had the power to jump from star to star. Maybe it opened a wormhole into this place and something went wrong."

Fabrini was crouched down, elbows on knees, studying the machine the creature had built. "What about this?"

Cushing stood up. He studied it carefully. "I think . . . I think it might be a teleporter. A teleportation device. A sort of machine that might be quite common where that thing came from, but is thousands of years beyond us."

"You lost me," Menhaus said. "What does it do?"

Cushing gave him his best guess. The alien was trapped here, in Dimension X, and its ship was damaged, so it decided to tunnel its way back out. It made the teleporter — if that's what it was at all, he freely admitted — to punch a hole back through time/space to its own dimension, its own world.

"It might have had this on the ship," he said. "Sort of like we carry liferafts, they carry something a little more sophisticated. But, Christ, this is a really wild guess on my part. It could be just about anything. Maybe some kind of communications device. Who really knows?"

Again, more randy speculation on his part. He told them it might have chosen this freighter because of the radioactive waste in the barrels. Maybe it was tapping that,

charging its machine with atomic power.

"Hell, this contraption might run on cold fusion . . . the mechanics of the stars themselves. If it is a teleporter, though, then the mathematics and physics behind this thing are probably ten-thousand years beyond us. It boggles the imagination."

George said, "I read Greenberg's letter . . . he seemed to think there were wormholes everywhere. Maybe this thing just opens them?"

Menhaus was kneeling next to it. "Christ, there's no buttons or levers or readouts. Nothing. How the hell do you turn it on?"

"Good question," Cushing said.

Menhaus was checking out those mirrors at either end. They didn't look much like mirrors really. There didn't seem to be any glass in them or anything else for that matter. But there was something there . . . some see-through type of material like a shiny veil. He touched the front mirror with his hand, felt a tingling sensation. Shrugging, he thrust his hand in and . . . it *disappeared.* Well, not really. His hand was stuck in that mirror up to the knuckles, only his fingers didn't come out the other side, they came out of the *other* mirror, from the back end.

Menhaus gasped, pulled his hand out. It was fine.

"Do it again," Saks told him.

Licking his lips, he put his hand up to the knuckles again. His fingers wiggled from the rear of the other mirror. Separated by nearly six feet of space, yet whole, connected, alive.

"I think you're sticking your hand into the fourth dimension," Cushing told him, very excited now. "The usual rules of space and distance don't apply."

"That's freaking me out," Fabrini said. "You stick your hand in the front . . . it comes out the back? That's some weird shit."

"Does it hurt?" Elizabeth asked Menhaus.

Menhaus shook his head. "It feels kind of cold in there, tingly, but nothing beyond that."

"Pull your hand out," Cushing warned him. "If that thing cuts out . . . well, your fingers might fall off on the other end."

Menhaus yanked his hand back out.

Saks was kneeling next to him. He touched the scope-like projection on top and his fingers sparked. "Static electricity," he said. He placed his hand on it. "Yeah . . . the whole goddamn thing is crawling with static electricity . . ."

Saks pulled his hand away and the machine began to hum. Quietly at first, then louder.

"I don't think we should fool with this," Elizabeth said.

But it was too late. Saks touching it had activated something. The humming rose up to a whining and the air around them crackled again with building energy. There was that smell of burnt ozone again, electricity and melted wiring. That narrow beam of white light came out of the back of the scope, struck the rear mirror and made it glow. The glow was reflected and broken into prisms of light that struck the front mirror or lens, were amplified into that blue beam of illumination that hit the bulkhead like a spotlight. There seemed to be millions of tiny dots dancing in the beam like bubbles in beer. Right away, buzzing with that blue light, the bulkhead looked insubstantial.

George was just in awe.

That blue glow on the bulkhead looked like the static on a TV screen, but busy and thrumming and alive. Like a blizzard or something. Looked like you could get lost in there and he had a funny feeling that you probably could at that.

"Don't touch that beam," Cushing told them. "You don't know what might happen."

George said, "We could use this thing, you know? Greenberg said that if you could find the spot where you first came into . . . into Dimension X, that it might open back up for you sooner or later. Maybe this thing is the key that could open it whenever we wanted it to."

"Or maybe it would suck you into an alien world," Cushing said.

Saks put his hand in the beam. "Kind of cold," he said. "Funny . . . feels like something's crawling all over my hand."

"Be careful," George told him, maybe secretly hoping that idiot would get sucked through and spit out on the sterile plains of Altair-4.

Cushing watched the beam, the dancing flecks of matter or energy in it. "Probably some sort of ionized field. Electrified gas or something. I wouldn't leave your hand in there too long. Not if you value it."

"Yeah," Fabrini said. "You lose a hand, Saks, there goes half your sex life."

Cushing was studying the machine closely. "That disk underneath could be sort of a generator, I suppose. That scope could be an accelerator. It directs a stream of particles at that rear mirror where something happens to them. Then they're reflected to the forward lens and that blue light must tear open time/space. Jesus, the minds that must have conceived of such a thing."

Fabrini was over near the bulkhead now. Before Cushing could tell him not to, he pressed his hand into the blue glow there. His hand went right through it. There was no wall there, just empty space.

"Careful," George told him. "You read what Greenberg said. If that's a wormhole, it could come out just about anywhere."

"Yeah, and maybe back on home sweet home."

"C'mon," George said. "You really think that alien opened up a portal into our world? Why would it . . . *she* do that?"

Fabrini didn't seem to have an answer for that. He was not a scientific type by nature or inclination. A lot of what Cushing told him was pretty much indecipherable. Too much theory, not enough fact. All he knew was that the teleporter was maybe a way out and he told them all that.

"No fucking way," George said. "You're not going through there . . . you know what the chances are of coming out anywhere?"

"He's right, Fabrini," Cushing said. "That alien was working on this thing. Elizabeth says she saw that glow for the past few days. Maybe it was fine-tuning this or something. You just can't step through there. You could end up just about anywhere . . . on some planet a million light years from earth or somewhere with a poisonous atmosphere. Shit, your atoms might get scattered like rice at a wedding. You really want to take that chance?"

He smiled. "Damn straight."

Saks started laughing. “You got to hand it to Fabrini. He ain’t much in the smarts department, but he’s got some serious balls.”

That was about as close to a compliment as Fabrini had ever gotten from Saks and he practically beamed.

Menhaus kept shaking his head. “You can’t, Fabrini. Listen to what Cushing is saying, it’s death in there. Don’t do it, okay?” He went over to Fabrini, laid his hands on his arms. “C’mon, please don’t do this. I don’t want to lose you.”

Fabrini was touched. He patted Menhaus on the back. “Don’t worry, Olly. I’ll be okay. I’m fucking Italian here. We got a great sense of self-preservation, us Italians.”

“Yeah, tell that to Mussolini,” George said.

But that went over his head like a high-flying bird. “I’m going through,” he said defiantly. “If I don’t come back, it’s my own stupid fault. But I’m telling you right now, all of you right now, that I’ve had it right up to here with this bullshit. This sitting around. This waiting. This hoping something don’t chew up our asses so we can make it maybe one more shitty day and find a way out. I can’t handle any more of that. Way I see it, it’s time for action and that’s that. Time to take a chance.”

George didn’t bother arguing: his mind was made up. That much was obvious. But what he was thinking was, *Fabrini, you stupid shit! Quit flexing your dick already, that testosterone is going to kill you. This isn’t about who’s got the biggest balls, it’s about using your fucking brain and staying alive.*

And, yeah, that’s exactly what he was thinking.

But he didn’t say it and he wished later that he had.

“He wants to go,” Saks said. “Let him go. Guy’s got nuts on him. Can’t say that for the rest of you pussies.”

That was it, then.

Fabrini was going.

Cushing said, “All right, all right. But at least let us tie a rope to you or something. Shit hits the fan, we can yank you back out.” That was what he said and it seemed perfectly reasonable, but there was doubt in his eyes. Bad doubt.

“There’s rope upstairs,” Saks said. “I saw it on our way down.”

“Get it,” Fabrini said.

Saks and Menhaus grabbed a lantern and went topside. They came back two minutes later with two coils of rope. Each had a hundred feet of line on them. They knotted the two ends together, figuring two-hundred feet would be plenty for Fabrini to see what was on the other side. Then they looped another end around his waist. Saks tied the knots. Square-knots strong enough to tow a car with.

“I’ll ask you one more time,” Elizabeth said, “to reconsider. Please, please don’t do this.”

Fabrini was unmoved and she turned away and stood in the doorway, her back to what she was certain was calculated madness.

“Just go in gradually,” Cushing said. “An arm or leg first, then just a peek. And hold your breath when you look in there. You inhale a lungful of ammonia or methane, not much we can do for you. Just go in easy.”

They tied the other end of the rope off to an iron bench across the room that was bolted to the floor. It would have taken a couple bull elephants to yank it free. Fabrini

stood near the glowing blue wall, looking pale and tense. Maybe he wanted then to turn back, maybe he wanted to do the sensible thing, but his manhood was at stake now. He couldn't back down, not in front of Saks.

"Good luck, Fabrini," Saks said.

And George raised an eyebrow. There was something he didn't like there. Saks was too . . . *what?* Too anxious? Too eager? Definitely, too *something.* Like he knew what was about to happen, had been waiting for it, and was about to see it all come together. If George had to put a name to that smarmy little smile on his face he would have said, *contented.*

That sonofabitch is up to something, George found himself thinking. He's up to no fucking good.

George looked over at Cushing and Cushing seemed to be thinking something along those lines, too.

"Listen," he said to Fabrini. "You back out, nobody's gonna think less of you. This isn't worth the risk. Just stay here. We'll go up to that ship and-"

"Ah, don't let em dick you around," Saks said. "They don't have any guts, Fabrini. Not like you. You're the only real man here."

"Take up that rope," Fabrini said. "Play it out slow."

He turned to that glowing blue field.

George heard something like cymbals crash in his head. His heart skipped a beat and the flesh at the back of his neck got very, very tight.

Fabrini stepped into the beam. He instantly looked liked he'd been dyed blue, those particles in there making him look like a man in a sandstorm. "Funny," he said, his voice oddly muffled by the energy flow. "Yeah . . . like it's crawling all over you." He was running his fingers through it and those effervescing particles cycled around him in a sort of loose helix like bubbles in a glass of champagne. "Weird . . . feels like I'm in a storm of tiny snowflakes or something. They kind of tickle."

"Do you feel all right?" Cushing asked him. "Not dizzy or nauseous or anything?"

He shook his head in the flow and his movements were jerky like he was caught in a strobe light. Flickering, irregular, not a solid and smooth motion like a person in normal space.

Fabrini stepped forward, put his hand through and pulled back out. "Feels okay, I guess. Kind of chilly or thick or something."

Saks was standing just outside the flow, a few feet away from him.

George and Menhaus had taken up the rope. Were gripping it very tightly like they were hanging on for dear life. Except it wasn't their life that they were worried about.

Fabrini put both arms through the field and just stood there, maybe waiting for something to happen. But there was nothing. He turned his head to look at them with that same jerking, surreal animation like a TV cartoon with every other frame cut out. "Okay," he said. "It's okay."

Cushing was standing there, breathing very hard. His hands bunching in and out of fists, the knuckles popping white as moons. Under his breath, he said, "That flow cuts out, it cuts out and he'll be trapped in that bulkhead, he'll become part of it . . ."

George heard him, some crazy picture in his mind of the teleporter clicking off like a light switch and Fabrini trapped there, his atoms mixed with those of the bulkhead,

arms stuck in one side of the wall and out the other.

Fabrini stuck his face through and kept it there for a few moments. “It’s dark on the other side . . . real dark . . . but I think I see some lights in the distance.”

“Go easy with it,” Cushing said between clenched teeth.

Fabrini nodded, stepped through that blue and thrumming field. He created black, ghostly ripples as he broached it. Then he was gone and they waited for him to *say* something, but there was only silence. Yet, he was there, somewhere . . . both George and Menhaus could feel the tension on the rope.

“Why doesn’t he say something?” Menhaus said, sounding alarmed.

“Sound . . . sound might not carry through the field,” Cushing said.

Then, out of the field, Fabrini’s voice: *“I’m . . . all right, all right.”* But that voice was odd and wavering, tinny like it was coming through a distant transistor radio and not a very good one. His words were drawn out, then compressed, echoing with an unearthly and spectral sound. *“ . . . okay . . . I . . . it’s dark . . . I can see the dark . . . lights ahead, funny lights and . . . and . . . weird . . . weird shapes . . . blobs and bubbles . . . no they’re square or triangles . . . no they’re blobs . . . crystals, building crystals blowing and shining and what’s that? The rope is cut! The rope is cut! I can’t see it!”*

“We have the rope!” George called out. “We can feel you on it!”

That voice again, echoing, splintering, bouncing around like a ball. *“No . . . it’s okay okay . . . the rope it ends just a few feet from me like . . . like it’s broken . . . then it starts up again above me or below me . . . I can’t be sure,”* he called back to them. His voice sounded fragile, like it was shattering and full of static. As if the sound waves were vibrating madly, flying apart. *“I . . . my hands . . . they’re wrong . . . my thumbs are on the wrong side . . . I can’t see my feet . . . I don’t have any feet . . . my thumbs are coming out of my palms . . . where is my body . . . where.. “*

“Pull him out,” Cushing said frantically. “Pull him the hell out of there!”

George and Menhaus yanked on the line, but it would not come. It felt like it was tied off to a slab of concrete. Saks took hold of it and so did Cushing, burned and bandaged hands or not. But the rope was stuck. They pulled and tugged until sweat ran down their faces.

“Fabrini!” Cushing cried out. “Fabrini? Can you hear me? Can you feel the rope in your hands? Follow the rope back through . . .”

“Rope . . . rope . . . rope . . . it’s stuck through me . . . I have too many legs, too many legs . . . what is that . . . that pale green face . . . no not a face . . . a cube . . . a living cube and a worm and a face of crystal . . . a million crawling bubbles . . . get me out of here! White faces without bodies . . . without eyes . . . don’t let them touch me . . . don’t let them touch me! GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

Again, they yanked on the rope, everyone shouting and panicked and just utterly beside themselves. But the rope was not budging. It was hooked to something or around something and George doubted that even a bulldozer could have pulled it free.

“C’mon!” Menhaus shouted. “Pull! Pull! We gotta get him out of there!”

“It’s no good,” Saks said, panting.

George and Cushing gave the rope a final tug. It went limp in their hands, then taut, then limp again. It began to flop first this way, then that as if they had landed the mother of all trout. The field began to shimmer and then they could feel Fabrini’s weight

on the other end again, he was screaming now, screaming something about "inside-out faces melting into hungry bubbles." They gave the rope a good yank and Fabrini came through for just a moment, part of him did anyway.

But it wasn't right, whatever was on the other side, whatever void or dimension or fractal between, had changed him, mixed-up his atoms maybe. They saw his back and his neck and the gold chain he always wore around his throat lit up like it was electrified. But there didn't seem to be a head on top of his neck and his left arm was detached, floating above his head. His right arm was connected, but instead of the arm facing forward at the crook of his elbow, it was facing backward like it had been put back on wrong. And the rope . . .

The rope was not looped around him, it had passed right through his back and out the other side.

And he was screaming. God, yes, he was screaming with what sounded like a hundred spectral voices just out of sync with one another.

Elizabeth screamed and so did George.

Then Fabrini was pulled back into whereever he had been, but his left arm was still disembodied and it was alive, working, not bleeding or damaged in any way. Like when Menhaus had passed his hand into the mirror and his fingers came out of the other mirror. It was like that. Somehow, some way, through some obscene perversion of matter, that arm was still connected. Everyone watched it. It was gripping something and pulling itself along it.

"The rope," George said. "The rope . . . it's pulling itself along the rope . . ."

Then it, too, was gone.

Fabrini was just shrieking on the other side and there wasn't a goddamn thing they could do about it.

The rope came alive in their hands again. Something on the other side took it and with such force, it nearly pulled George and Menhaus right into the flow, too. The rope burned through their palms, whipping and snapping, jerking to the left, the right. Up, then down. Then it dropped slack in the flow, but did not fall, as if it was caught in some unbelievable stasis of antigravity. It just floated like a length of hose floating on the surface of a river.

George and the others just stood there.

Menhaus' jaw was hanging open, his eyes wide and unblinking.

Saks just stepped back and away from the flow.

Then George found himself and reached in there, took hold of the rope and it was so very cold it burned his hands. He squealed like he had been scalded, but yanked the rope out. Cushing took hold of it where it wasn't in the flow and Menhaus joined him. They pulled and the rope came out of the field easily.

And so did Fabrini.

He stumbled out of the flow . . . except he didn't stumble, he *drifted.* Like a balloon he drifted out of the flow. He was seized up tight, arms at his sides, frozen stiff as meat in a freezer. His face was locked in some frightening, inanimate cataleptic sort of stupor like Bela Lugosi's trademark catatonic stare.

That's when George noticed — as they all did — that Fabrini was transparent. They could see right through him. It wasn't Fabrini, not really, but more like a reflection

of Fabrini. Like he had been replaced by this empyreal, extradimensional wraith.

Menhaus muttered something under his breath and reached out, touched Fabrini. He instantly cried out, his fingers frostbitten as if he'd touched dry ice. Where his fingertips had made contact, Fabrini's image fluttered, trembled, then began to dissolve and was suddenly not there at all. The rope shuddered in midair, looped around nothing that anyone could see. Then it fell limply to the floor.

Menhaus made a choking, gagging sound, trying to catch his breath. "He was solid, but he was gas . . . he was solid . . . I could feel him . . . but cold, so very cold . . ."

And then, from the other side of the field, they could hear Fabrini crying out for help. No, he was not just crying, but screaming, begging, pleading to be pulled out of there. Just shrieking his mind away and it was almost too much for anyone standing there. Even Saks looked like he was about to faint.

Cushing, knowing full well the futility of it all, took up a gaff and waded right into the flow, Elizabeth shouting at him to get out of there. He reached through the buzzing blue field with it, reaching around in there for something, anything. But the gaff wasn't long enough to grab anything if there was indeed anything to grab.

Menhaus took up the rope, cut the loop off it. Then he unscrewed the hook off the end of one of the gaffs and tied it firmly on there. He stepped into the flow with it and, whipping it around over his head like a cowboy about to rope a stray doggie, he tossed it through the field. Then pulled it back. Tossed it and pulled it back. Kept doing it.

"He's gone," Saks said.

And he was . . . yet he wasn't. You could still hear him from time to time screaming out there for help. That voice would get so loud it would pull your guts out, then so quiet it was like a cry for help coming from a house several streets away in the dead of night.

And George thought: *It's like they're dragging a river for a corpse.*

And that's exactly what they were doing.

Cushing stayed in the flow with Menhaus and they took turns. Kept at it for maybe ten minutes until they caught a hold of something. They looked at each other with jerky motions in the flow. Whatever they had, they were reeling it in. They stepped from the flow and George helped them land it.

"Maybe . . . maybe you guys better not do that," Saks said.

And he was probably right.

But they kept pulling until they dragged something through the field and out of the flow, something like a pile of dusty, filthy rags.

"Jesus," Menhaus said, turning away.

It was Fabrini.

Or what was left of Fabrini.

Something shriveled and desiccated, dusty and shrunken like a mummy pulled from an Egyptian tomb. That's what they were seeing. It was a man, but petrified like prehistoric wood. His flesh had gone to a wrinkled, parched leather, seamed and fissured and ancient. Two spidery hands were held out before the face in brown skeletal claws as if to ward off a blow. And the face . . . distorted, grotesque, almost clownish in its gruesome exaggeration. It no longer had eyes, just blackened hollows that were wide and shocked. The mouth was open as if frozen in a contorted scream . . . the left side of it

pulled up nearly to the corner of the left eye like maybe that cadaverous face had been soft putty that was molded into a fright mask to scare the kiddies with.

Truth was, it scared everyone that looked at it.

But they kept looking and kept seeing it and kept feeling the absolute, almost cosmic horror of Fabrini's degeneration. That grinning mouth of peg-teeth . . . gray, crumbling teeth like old headstones; the body that was more rags and bones and worm-holed oak than man; those eyes which were just hollow, mocking pits like maybe Fabrini had clawed his own eyes out rather than look at what and *who* was around him. Yeah, they kept looking and the reality, the truth of this particular nightmare covered them, drowned them, invaded secret places and defiled their very souls. For what they saw and what they knew, it had . . . *weight.* The sort of weight that would crush them, squeeze the pulp right out of them.

About then, they turned away.

Cushing was trying hard not to cry, not to rage, not to turn on one of them . . . maybe Saks, *probably* Saks . . . and take it out on them. George was feeling the same thing: like a dozen uncontainable emotions had suddenly burst in him like a shower of black sparks, and he was burning, just burning up inside, the heat turning his mind to sauce.

And they all had to wonder what awful set of circumstances could have mummified Fabrini like that and what . . . dear God . . . what had he looked upon to wrench and warp and buckle his face like that? To turn that handsome, swarthy face of his to something like a twisted tribal fetish mask carved from deadwood?

"No, no, no," Menhaus was saying. "That ain't Fabrini. No fucking way that's Fabrini . . . this, this *thing* it's been dead longer than Christ . . ."

"It's him, all right," Saks said.

And there really was no doubt of that.

Because they could see the tarnished chain around its neck that had once been gold and knew that this collection of rags and threadbare hides was Fabrini. But to look at him, at that scarecrow body and grisly deathmask, you could not get past the fact that he looked like he had been physically dead thousands of years like that Neolithic iceman pulled out of the Swiss Alps.

Physically dead . . . yet his voice raged on beyond the ionized field. Discorporeal, insane, and bleak, yet pathetically aware and alive. A disembodied voice screaming its sanity away in a buzzing, silent blizzard of nothingness: *"Help me . . . help me . . . help me . . . oh dear God somebody please help me help me-"*

Saks went over to the alien machine and kicked it. It made a popping, crackling sound and the flow instantly cut out. The generator fading to a low hum and then nothing at all.

And George was trying to pull his mind together, trying to hold it tight in his fist before it flew apart into fragments. He was not a physicist, but he understood enough of Greenberg's theories now to formulate one of his own. Fabrini had jumped into some dimension where time was not what it was here. In that terrible place, time was subverted, bent, blown all out of sane proportions. Fabrini had died over there. Starved to death or suffocated, an insane and gibbering thing thousands of years before. Yet his mind had not died. His consciousness did not particulate and dissolve. It was eternal and aware. While

minutes passed here, thousands of years passed there in a place where time had no true meaning. Imagine that, George thought, alone in that void for countless millennia with nothing but crawling alien geometries for company, things that could not probably even see you or know you were there. Alone, alone, alone . . . alone with the barren geography of your own mind for ten thousand years or a million. *Jesus.*

And Fabrini would always be alive in that black, godless dimension.

A stream of atoms forever drifting and dissipating, but alive and aware and insane beyond any insanity ever known or conceived of. A tormented consciousness fading into eternity, alone, always alone, undying.

Nobody said anything for a time.

Nobody could say anything.

At least Saks had had the sense to turn that awful machine off so they didn't have to listen to Fabrini, to the blasphemy of his endless, bodiless agony. A tactile creature in a world of shadows and anti-matter and non-existence.

He was flaking away, just crumbling now like a vampire in the rays of the sun. Flecks of dust lit off him, bits of him went to powder and rained gradually to the deck like grains of sand. One of his arms fell off, hit the floor and shattered into dirt and debris like it had been sculpted from dry clay. Very dry clay. It was probably the sudden immersion in this atmosphere, after countless centuries in that other.

As they stood there, Fabrini kept breaking apart until he looked like a heap of debris dumped from a vacuum cleaner bag.

Menhaus looked positively slack like his bones had gone to poured rubber. He could barely support his own weight. He just slouched there, drained and beaten and broken, his eyes livid and hurtful.

"So much for Fabrini," Saks said.

That warmed up Menhaus. He stood up straight, his eyes blazing with an almost animal ferocity. It was too much. First Cook, then Pollard, and now Fabrini. He went right at Saks. Went right up to him and punched him square in the face. Saks almost went down, a trail of blood coming out of his mouth.

"You!" Menhaus bellered. "You knew something like this would happen and you wanted it to happen!"

Saks nodded, a vile and bleeding thing.

Then he and Menhaus went at other with claws and teeth, hitting and kicking and scratching and it took both George and Cushing to pull them apart. George had to hit Saks three times until he fell away and Cushing had to toss Menhaus to the floor.

"Dead man," Saks told him, spitting out blood. "You're a dead man, you fucking faggot! I'll kill you! Swear to God, I'll kill you!"

And whether that was directed at George or Menhaus or both of them, it was really hard to tell. Elizabeth stood there, shaking her head, not surprised at the ways of men, but generally disappointed as she was now.

"Let's go," she said. "I've had enough."

And that sounded good.

Except Menhaus wasn't done. He came up now with George's .45 in his hand. It had been on the floor where George dropped it and now Menhaus had it. He leveled it and George and Cushing got out of the way.

"What're you gonna do with that, you pussy?" Saks said.

So Menhaus showed him.

He pulled the trigger and put a slug in his guts.

Saks gasped, a flower of blood blossoming at his belly. Drops of it oozed between his clasped fingers. He staggered back, looked like he'd fall, and staggered over to the doorway. They heard him stumbling up the companionway, swearing and gasping.

George slapped Menhaus across the face and he dropped the gun.

"He had it coming," was all Menhaus would say. "That bastard's been asking for it."

And George, numb from toes to eyebrows, thought, *yes, he did at that.*

22

They couldn't find Saks.

They looked and looked for over an hour, canvassing that ship and although their thoughts were still dark and their moods just as gray as stormy skies, getting away from that room and the remains of Pollard and Fabrini and that alien husk had been good for them. Searching for Saks, having something to do, it was even better.

Finally, they gave up.

Elizabeth said a few words over the remains of Pollard and Fabrini and they all bowed their heads, remembering things that made them smile and other things that made them cry. But mostly just bowing their heads because gravity seemed to be pulling them down and they had all they could do not to give in and go to their knees.

"All right," George finally said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

They poled their way back to the *Mystic* through the weave of dense fog, past the carcasses of dead ships caught in the weed. They took their turns on the poles and said very little and wondered a great deal.

Taking a break and lighting a cigarette with shaking fingers, George told Cushing what he thought had happened to Fabrini. About him being alone for maybe thousands of years in that other place, his mind never dying, just suspended, preserved like something floating in a corked jar of alcohol.

"Yeah," Cushing said. "About what I was thinking. Time . . . well it wasn't the same on the other side."

"Where was he?"

Cushing just shook his head. "The Fifth Dimension? Sixth? Tenth? Shit, who knows, but a place so alien I don't want to think about it."

George was staring at the alien machine at Cushing's feet. He had brought it along despite Elizabeth's protests. Even now, she was glaring at it and him like it was Pandora's proverbial box and she was afraid the lid was going to blow off it.

George dragged off his cigarette, blew smoke out his nostrils. "That alien . . . that Martian . . . whatever the fuck it was-"

"I doubt it was a Martian," Cushing said, trying to laugh, but it just wouldn't come.

"You know what I mean, smartass. That . . . *being*. You suppose it could have helped us? I mean really helped us if we could have talked sense to it?"

Cushing nodded. "Without a doubt. You have any idea of the sort of hyper-intellect it must have possessed? The secrets a race like that must know? Yeah, George, it wanted to, it could have calibrated this magic box and shot us straight to Disneyland if it wanted to." He sighed. "But let's face it, it wasn't exactly the friendly type. You saw how it looked at us. You felt it look *into* you. I saw it doing that, that's why I hit it with the axe. So much for my hands."

"I owe you," George said and meant it.

"What was that like? It looking into you like that?"

"I honestly don't know. I felt like my mind was emptied, that I felt very small and helpess. Other that, I don't remember anything."

"Well, doesn't matter. That thing was-"

"Evil," Elizabeth said and dared anyone to contradict her. "You know it and I know it. Maybe it was an advanced life form, as you called it, but it was cold and diabolic. It looked at us like scientists look at mice in a cage . . . something to be toyed with."

"You're right," Cushing told her. "As usual, you're absolutely right."

And George knew she was, too.

There was evil as in human evil and then there was the other kind. Cosmic evil. An evil so malign and ravening that it was practically supernatural to the human mind. The alien had been like that. Evil to the fourth power. Evil fucking squared. And thinking such thoughts, feeling embarrassed and, yes, liberated by thinking them, George found himself doing something he had not done since childhood: praying. Yes, in his head he was praying to anything that would listen to him. Hoping, begging for some sort of divine guidance and protection. He'd never had much use for religion, but now? Oh yes, he needed it. He needed to feel a guiding hand on him that would deliver them from this hell. And he thought that if there was no god, no superior consciousness out there, then the human race and all the other struggling dumbassed races in the universe were seriously screwed. Because things like that alien would crush them and there wasn't a goddamn thing they could do about it. If there was no creator, no divine protector . . . then, shit, that meant that the human race was just a bunch of upright, intelligent apes scratching in the dirt for meaning, for revelation. Trying to make sense out of something that was innately senseless.

The idea of that was terrifying.

They kept poling along and then, gradually, the *Mystic* began to come out of the mist at them, taking form and solidity as the fog abandoned it. George sat there looking at it, getting a funny vibe off of it that he could not classify. For some unknown reason, he was equating that ship with a tomb.

Menhaus paused on his pole, squinted into the mist. "It's changed," he said.

Elizabeth had stopped poling, too. The scow slid into the weeds and came to a stop. She was staring up at the *Mystic* and looking tense, looking concerned.

"Looks the same," Cushing said, as if maybe he didn't believe it for one moment.

George was suddenly aware that he felt very rigid. All his muscles were contracted and tight. His eyes were wide and his breathing shallow. His ears were open and his mind was totally clear of anything but the ship. He was feeling it, too. The ship *had* changed. But how? He could not put words to it, but something about it, about its aura maybe had been violated. It just felt wrong. He wasn't about to put any of what he was feeling down to some latent psychic gift brewing in the basement of his being, yet it was surely something like that. Something tenuous, but there all the same. Some ancient network of fear powering up and telling him to get ready for the shit, because it was definitely coming.

Menhaus, very calmly, said, "Something happened after we left. Something . . . something was here after we left."

Cushing seemed to be feeling it now, too. He swallowed and then swallowed again. "Let's go see what it was."

23

On board, that sense of danger became positively electric in George. It was here, something was here, something had passed in the fog and left . . . he wasn't sure *what* it had left. But the atmosphere of the boat was certainly different. That sense of desecration was there, was very palpable. And George knew it the way you knew when something intimate to you was handled roughly, touched by hands that had no business touching it. Like the objects in your room had been touched, put back an inch or two out of place. Not so anyone would notice except for you.

They stood on the deck, fingers of fog drifting around their legs like hungry cats. The mist was luminous and pulsing behind them. If there could be a soundtrack to all this, George knew, it would be someone plucking the strings of a violin. Strings off-key an octave or two.

First thing they saw was that the aft bulkhead of the main cabin was blackened. When Menhaus prodded it with his axe, it flaked away like it had crystallized in a firestorm.

"Like what Fabrini said of the *Cyclops,"* George said. "That Swedish ship him and Cook read about in the log."

"Danish. The *Korsund,* he called it. It was out of Copenhagen."

Several sections of the deck had been charred black and there was a snotty tangle of something like fungus hanging from the main mast. It was glowing with a shimmering, internal light.

They all noticed that, too.

They went below.

The companionway walls were smeared with clots of some phosphorescent matter as if something huge had forced itself down the stairwell, bits of it breaking off above, below, and to either side.

"Don't touch that shit," Cushing warned them.

They made it into the saloon cabin. Everything was burnt. The carpet was ashes beneath their footsteps. Elizabeth was taking it all in. Her chest was rising and falling rapidly, her right hand locked tight on the hilt of her machete. Her lips were pulled into a tight line.

They found Aunt Else first.

There would be no more legal motions by her. There would be no more of anything. She was in her bunk, a twisted and incinerated thing. The stench of cremated flesh was unbearable.

Elizabeth made a choking sound and turned away.

George was sickened by it, yet he looked long enough to see that the sheets below her were not charred in any way. As if, Aunt Else had been tossed into a blast furnace, fished out, and dumped back here. By they all knew by that point what had happened and it was not from heat. Not as they understood heat.

They found Crycek next.

He was not dead, yet very close. He was badly burned, but his face was more or less unmolested. His hair had gone white and his eyes had gone white with them. He was

laying in his bunk, gasping and drooling and coughing out tangles of slime that were suffused with a shine like the fungus on deck. A terrible transformation had overtaken him. And it was more than those eyes like mirrors whitened by steam or that glowing mucus running from his mouth. It was much more than that. For Crycek looked like he had aged a hundred years, had been taken high into unthinkable heights and at such momentum that he had been burned raw, worn to a nub.

Although he could not see them, he knew they were there. "Oh yes, oh yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, it came while you were out . . . it came with colors and fire and eyes and ice . . . it came and kept coming . . ."

George wanted to block his ears, because he did not want to hear these profanties. Did not want to feel them spearing into his brain, tearing him open in too many places at once. Because in Dimension X there were things that you could fight and others that were ghosts and malignancies and creeping haunted matter and you didn't stand a chance, you just didn't stand a fucking chance and how was that for divine guidance?

Crycek was still talking, alternately cackling and moaning and making high, lunatic sounds no sane mind could produce. "You . . . you ought to see it . . . oh it's so cold . . . so bright and hot and cold and damp and dry . . . it pulls you into its mind and the blackness . . . the searing frozen blackness of forever . . . oh, oh, oh, you'll see . . . you'll feel it and it'll feel you . . ."

Then he died.

In mid-babble he just went stiff as a board and stayed that way.

Nobody seemed capable of moving then. They were just as inanimate as Crycek's corpse. They could only look at each other or not look at each other and just *feel* each other. Feel the settling, iron weight on one another's souls and feel the indecision re-making them into statues and mannequins and silent, immoveable things.

But Cushing?

No, not Cushing. He knew better as they all knew better, he knew how dangerous it was to stay. How each passing moment was cellular death and chromosomal suicide. Like standing on a hot skillet, waiting to sizzle and sputter like greasy strips of bacon.

"We gotta get out of here," he said, leading Elizabeth away by the hand. "Don't touch anything, don't handle anything . . . this entire place is radioactive waste now . . ."

Sullen, wordless, they let him lead them back up into the fog and down into the scow. And when they were in it, he and Menhaus poled them away from the *Mystic* which was now little better than the leaking core of a nuclear power plant. And all Cushing kept saying was: "The fallout . . . oh Jesus, the fallout, the black rain . . ."

24

So there were four of them, then. Not a lot, but something. A collective mind, a collective force, a last flexing muscle of humanity in that godless place, in that Dimension X or Dead Sea, that awful and nightmarish place of rended veils beyond the misting, black looking glass. Yes, they had come in numbers and this place had whittled them down like hickory, scattering shavings and chips in every which direction. And now they were just this last flexing muscle, but they had motion and drive and one last, gasping hope before the darkness took them. And they were going to put that muscle to use, they were going to hammer this place like hot metal, punch a hole through it, make it work for them. Before that other came, before that devil of fogs and anti-dimensions chewed the meat from their souls, they were going to make a stand.

Just one stand.

Because it was all they had, all they would ever have.

So they rowed through the noisome fog, fought through the ship's graveyard, clawing through the weed that was clotted jungle foilage and slipped around the carcasses of dead vessels until they cut their way into channels indicated on Greenberg's chart. Then the real work began, filling that last, lone lifeboat with ugency and steel, propelling it through the channels of slopping water and into the haunted wastelands of the Outer Sea.

And somewhere above, getting closer like jaws ready to snap, was the *Lancet* and the fabled Sea of Veils.

Closer and closer still.

25

One minute there was the fog, enshrouding and thick and gaseous, something steaming and boiling and giving birth to itself in dire, moist rhythms you could not even guess at. Something hot and smoldering born in sulfurous brimstone depths, billowing smoke and fumes and noxious clouds of itself, something burning itself out with its own heat and pressure and wasting radium breath.

And the next . . . the next your eyes were seeing through that weave of October mist, separating fibers and threads and filaments, looking at something that made a speading fever ignite in your belly until you thought your insides would melt and run out through your pores.

When they saw it, they stopped rowing.

They held their breath and forgot how to speak.

For maybe they had not found the *Lancet* . . . maybe it had found *them.*

George had been resting, smoking a cigarette and feeling for that light at the end of the tunnel. He had not been looking up. Had not been taking too much notice that the clumps of weeds were getting thicker or more numerous, were often welded into shoals and married into great, creeping green and yellow reefs. He had not been paying attention to any of that because that would have meant he would have had to look upon the fog and he just couldn't do that anymore. After days and days in its claustrophobic shifts, the more he watched it, the more it pressed in on him. Got up his nose and into his eyes, filled his pores and fouled his lungs. Made him feel dizzy, asphyxiated, a fish flopping on a beach.

So he was not looking when the *Lancet* made its appearance like the Flying Dutchman, like a plague ship with a seething, pestilent cargo in its belly. How he knew they had reached it, was that he simply *felt* it. Felt it coming up at them or reaching out with bony digits. He felt as if a thunderstorm were approaching or a Kansas tornado. There was something like an immediate drop in atmospheric pressure, a change in the air, a shivering in the fog. A thickness and a thinning and a roiling taint. A sense of time compressed and imploded. Everything seemed electric and engulfing and heavy as if the world had been drowned in a black wash of vibrant matter.

He looked up and, yes, there she was.

A big and long five-masted schooner, once high and proud and sharp and now just dead. A death ship. A corpse ship. Some wind-splitting leviathan that had strangled here in the ropes and mats of verdant, stinking weed. Yes, it had died here, thrashed and fought and raged, but finally died, an immense marine saurian dying beneath the pall of its own primeval breath. The flesh was picked from its bones. Its hide was riven by worms and gnawed by slimy things, moldered to carrion beneath a shroud of seaweed and alien fungi. And now it lay in state, a great petrified fossil, a labyrinth of fleshless arches and spidery rigging, skeletal masts and withered rungs of bone. A thing of shades and shadows and rolling vapors.

A ghost ship.

"There, there it is," Menhaus said, his voice raw and grating like he'd been gargling with crushed glass.

Everyone nodded or maybe they didn't, but mostly what they were doing was *feeling* it, that great ship which reeked of death and insanity and blackness. But that was what they were smelling in their heads. What their noses found was a repellent, odious stink of damp moldered earth and slimy bones rotting in ditches. The sort of smell that made your mouth go dry, made something pull up in your belly.

George was feeling that. Like maybe he'd just swallowed something rancid and his stomach was recoiling from it. It was like that, the fear that old ship inspired. It filled your belly in sickening waves, made you want to vomit just looking at it.

He could see it on all their faces — the dread resignation, that acceptance of ultimate doom. That look you saw in old photographs of faces pressed up against the fences of Mauthausen or Birkenau . . . an intimate knowledge of horror and an acceptance of it.

Cushing said, "Makes you . . . makes you want to row away from her fast as you can, don't it?"

And, sure, that's what they were all thinking as the terror threaded through them.

George had been afraid many, many times since entering Dimension X, as they now all called it. There had been times when he thought his mind would boil down to a sap and piss out his ears. It had been that bad. And more than once. He wasn't sure if the cadaver of the *Lancet* was the worse thing yet, but it surely was in the running. Because the terror on him was almost palpable, getting under his skin like an infection and turning his nerve endings to jelly. And as he sat there, thrumming with it, he decided that *real* terror as opposed to book-terror or movie-terror was much like hallucinating. Like tripping your brains right out on some sweet microdot . . . reality, as such, was suddenly made of cellophane and there was a great, gaping tear in it. That's what it was like. Exactly what it was like. It overwelmed you and sank you into a numb stupor.

"Okay, it's just another dead ship," Cushing said. "Let's go see what we came to see."

Hesitantly then, he and Elizabeth took to the oars and pushed the lifeboat through the weed and up close to that hulk. When they were so close that its shadow fell over them chill and black, Menhaus took the anchor and tossed it up and over the taffrail where it caught fast, striking the deck with a great hollow booming like an urn falling to a crypt floor in the dead of night. Menhaus pulled them in close until the moldering smell of that waterlogged casket was rubbed in their faces.

Up close, the *Lancet's* bulwarks were veiled in sediment and marine organisms . . . things like tiny sponges and barnacles and, of course, a dense matting of seaweed that seemed not to just grow over the ship, but into it.

"Let me see if I can get up there," Menhaus told them.

And George looked upon him with renewed respect. The guy was just as scared as the rest of them, but he was doing what had to be done and that was the true mark of a man, the true mark of a human being.

Menhaus tugged on the anchor line, made sure it held fast.

It did.

Which was surprising in of itself. The ship looked so rotten, so decayed, George thought that when Menhaus pulled on the line, the entire rail up there would come down on top of him.

Standing on the lip of the lifeboat, he reached up, took hold of the anchor line and pulled himself up it like a kid climbing a rope in gym class. And he did it pretty good, too. There was an unsuspected agility about him that made George think that old Jolly Olly had been an athlete back in the good old days. His feet skidded against the hull, scraping off shells and mildewed things. He shimmied up the rope maybe four or five feet, got hold of the railing and pulled himself up. Up and over.

Then he looked down at them. "I'm too old for this shit," he said. He looked around up there, staring and shaking his head. "Jesus Christ . . . you gotta . . . you gotta see this . . ."

And they supposed they didn't really have a choice.

Elizabeth went up next. She was in good shape and she made it look easy. Cushing followed her with no problem. George figured he'd grab that rope, lose his grip and fall into the weed. But he didn't. It took some straining, but he got up there, all right. A lifetime spent using his back and muscles paid off.

He flipped himself over the railing, hands pulling on him and then he was up, too.

The teak decks were filthy with dried mud and sediment, the husks of dead crabs and bony fishes protruding obscenely. The masts were bowed and swaying like ancient oaks, their wood discolored from seawater and advanced age. The sails hung in ragged flaps, stained gray with mildew, great lurching holes eaten in them. They looked to be made of graying, threadbare cheesecloth. From the mizzenmast aft to the foremast, all the sails drooped like moldered shrouds, ripped and dangling in ribbons. Most of the stays had rotted away, the jibs gone entirely. Drooping clots of seaweed and webs of fungi were tangled in what remained of the rigging, knotted around mastheads and yards, festooned like cobwebs over the mainsail boom. From forepeak to stern, the *Lancet* was a dead and decaying thing exhumed from a muddy grave, dripping with slime and netted with fungi and assorted unpleasant growths.

Everything just stank of brine and age and moist corruption.

As George and the others moved, those bleached, filthy decks creaked beneath them and the masts groaned overhead like they might fall at any moment. The main cabin was covered in a growth of something like yellow moss. There were huge tarnished kettles in the bows and behind the foremast was a large, imposing naval gun that was green with age. A rope of tangled fungi drooped from the barrel like it had vomited out its insides.

But these were things they expected, what they didn't expect they found at the quarterdeck.

Something like wagon wheels were set upright and nailed to the bulkheads with rusty flatnails. And on them, spreadeagled, were scarecrows shackled down. Except they weren't scarecrows, but the mummies of men . . . husks covered in leathery hides that had erupted open in innumerable places to reveal staffs and baskets of bone. Their faces were skulls set with membranes of skin, jaws sprung open. Tendrils of fungi knotted them up, hanging off their ribcages and ulnas and mandibles in threads and narrow intersecting ropes.

"Jesus," Menhaus said. "What . . . what is all this?"

"You tell me," George said.

Because it wasn't just at the quarterdeck, but everywhere . . . the *Lancet* was a

mausoleum. There were bones scattered everywhere, some attached and other just flung about like the scraps from an ogre's meal. Skeletons were hung in cages suspended from the yards and in makeshift gibbets that you had to duck under. There were others lashed into the rusting sail hoops on the mainmast, leering down with grinning faces and empty eye sockets. What might have been either the remains of their clothing or rags of flesh dangled obscenely from them. Yes, everywhere, morbid shadows and grisly deathmasks peering out, riven agonized faces boiled down to bone and embalmed stick figures that looked much like cobwebbed death angels from a churchyard.

Menhaus tried to back away from it, but the dead were at every turn. He stumbled over a mortuary heap of yellowed, jawless skulls and let out a high little scream.

And it was too much. Just all too much.

There were grated hatchways set along the decks and under them, cramped little cells that couldn't have been more than three-feet high. And in them . . . bones. Dozens and dozens of skeletons crowded and piled and tangled together. Had to be hundreds of them that looked to be mancled with shackles and leg irons. Ossuary pits. But it was more than that, for as Cushing shined his flashlight down into one of those death pits, he could clearly see something . . . *incredible.* The skeletons were not just crowded and intermeshed down there, but horribly charred as if they'd been burned. And they looked . . . *melted.* Yes, dissolved and fused together as if dunked in some sort of acid.

What kind of heat could possibly melt bones together?

"This is fucking insane," George said. "A prison ship or something."

But Cushing didn't seem convinced. "I think it's worse than that."

There was a sudden creaking just beyond the aftermast and a voice said, "A slaver. This was a slave ship."

George almost fell out of his skin.

A bent-over, emaciated man with long white hair and matching beard stepped out. His face was dirty, lined like old sandstone.

"Dr. Greenberg, I presume," Cushing said.

"It was, of course, what the ONR had us doing with Project Neptune," Greenberg told them. "We were studying electromagnetic gravitation. Trying to duplicate, under laboratory conditions, aberrant electromagnetic storms. Creating magnetic, cyclonic storms which would in turn, we thought, open a magnetic vortex that was self-augmenting for the purposes of interdimensionl transition. Do you see? That's what the Navy had us doing. Creating a sort of electromagnetic tornado which is about as close to a black hole as you can get under controlled conditions."

Greenberg had been talking non-stop.

God knew how long it had been since he talked to anyone and he was certainly making up for it now. The first thing he told them about was the *Lancet,* which was an illegal slave ship bound from the Gold Coast of Africa to Virginia . . . except somewhere in the Sargasso Sea, fate intervened and the ship ended up here in Dimension X. Its captain, a brutal fellow by the name of Preen, used his slaves as sacrifices to the entity, the Fog-Devil.

"But eventually, much as on the *Cyclops* and the *Korsund,* this creature, this Fog-Devil as you call it, began taking lives and minds of its own accord despite Preen's offerings. Its radioactive aftermath must have killed everyone eventually, even Preen."

He said that all he knew was pieced together from Preen's log and pure speculation. There was no way to acurately know the level of desperation, horror, and madness that had taken this ship and its attendant souls.

Greenberg seemed uncomfortable with the subject of the Fog-Devil, preferred physics.

He said the ONR had been fooling around with high-intensity magnetic fields for years, trying to create the sort of pulsating or vortexual field that occurred randomly and naturally in the Sargasso Sea/Devil's Triangle area . . . with varying results. Sometimes comical and sometimes disastrous.

"What we were doing with Project Neptune and, yes, later privately with the Procyon Project of ours was pretty much based on Einstein's Unified Field Theory which, as you may know, was the great man's attempts to explain the underlying unity between electromagnetic, gravitational, and subatomic forces. Einstein never finished it, but many, many others of us have been working to that very end for years. Trying to garner practical, applied results from theoretical ends."

Basically, he said, the idea he and the others in Procyon were fooling with was that the attraction between molecules could be altered by an ionized field, a force field in TV jargon. This field, essentially, would create a tear in the fabric of time/space and allow the introduction or extraction of matter from another dimension. Essentially, the transference of matter from one spatial universe to another.

"And you did?" Cushing said.

"Yes, we did," Greenberg said, but did not seem happy about it. "We engineered a generator that did not actually *create* said vortex or field, but one that, if you knew the location where these sporadic vortices occurred, could more or less force them to open."

"And it worked and you ended up here?"

"Yes. The generator worked . . . but the amount of juice it had to cycle to create the field, well, it blew the thing into about a hundred pieces. It went up like the Fourth of July. By the time myself and the others on the *Ptolemy* got that fire under control, we had been introduced into this place. If you read my letter as you say, you understand that what happens is that the vortex shuttles you into the fourth dimension, then out again into this place which I firmly believe is sort of a fractal."

"The passage through the fourth," George said. "It goes pretty quick."

Greenberg nodded, snapped his fingers. "Mere seconds. Although you pass through a limitless amount of actual space, you do it essentially in hyperspace."

Elizabeth listened, but was not moved by anything Greenberg said. She did not like the man and made no attempt to hide the fact. He recognized her, of course, and she offered him only the coolest of acknowledgments. And what it came down to with her was that she thought Greenberg was a fool. A fool that had cost her uncle his life and would, no doubt, cost the others their lives as well.

So she kept silent.

Menhaus just listened.

Once Greenberg had espoused his theories of time/space anomalies, whether natural or artificially-induced, and had thoroughly exhausted them, Cushing brought the alien machine aboard. Greenberg was ecstatic. He had to hear the story again and again. For here was an example of alien technology concieved by intellects light years beyond man's. The machine, the teleporter, was the very thing the members of the Procyon Project had dreamed of. But unlike their version — which took up all available deck space on the *Ptolemy,* weighed in at over a ton, took three generators working in tandem to produce the energy it needed, and blew apart after five minutes of operation — this was a miracle of engineering. Like comparing a horse-driven carriage to a supersonic fighter, he said.

He lifted it off the deck, set it back down. "Amazing . . . it doesn't even weigh five pounds. I'll bet . . . yes, I'll bet that disk is some sort of cold fusion generator. You could probably power a dozen factories with it, maybe a city."

But the excitement was too much for him.

He sat on the deck, breathing hard and trembling, finally coughing out some blood.

He did not look too good. He had patches of hair missing from his scalp and open sores on his arms and neck. "Radiation sickness," he explained to them. "I've been exposed to toxic levels."

He told them that when the Fog-Devil had passed earlier, he had hid below in a lead-lined safe that Preen used for his booty once upon a time. For, judging by the mounted gun, Preen had been something of a pirate in-between running human beings.

"Are . . . are we all exposed then?" Menhaus said.

"No . . . no, I have a Geiger Counter," Greenberg explained. "Brought it along to make sure our machine wasn't spitting out radiation on the *Ptolemy.* You're safe enough, friend. The . . . Fog-Devil, it just passed by, but even then, the radiation levels were ungodly. Had it directed itself . . . well, I wouldn't be here."

George figured it must've have passed here on its way to the *Mystic.* Maybe sniffed around for something to devour, then went on its way.

"You need medical care," Cushing said.

Greenberg chuckled. "I'm far beyond that, I'm afraid."

He refused to discuss it anymore. The alien machine had taken hold of his mind and his imagination. Cushing showed him how it worked. He put his hand on the scope and right away, there was that crackling energy in the air, that weird vibration, then that blue field thrown up against the bulkhead of the aft cabin. Greenberg was smart, though. He did not put his hand in the stream, he used the handle of a broom instead.

"Fascinating." He stroked his bearded chin and mumbled under his breath for a time. "You know . . . this may be the way out. If you were to take this device to your point of origin here, which is the same as mine, I would guess this machine could open up the vortex and you could escape."

Which is pretty much what everyone wanted to hear.

"But how would we find the vortex?" Cushing asked. "We could search for weeks in that mist and never see it."

"Compass," Greenberg said. "Just an ordinary liquid compass. There are no poles here, nothing for a magnetic compass needle to point to. What they *will* point to are vortex sites, areas of electromagnetic instability, variance. Trust me, I spent some time experimenting with this."

"Then let's get to it," Menhaus said.

"Yes, you should do that," Greenberg told them. "Now is a very bad time for your little visit. A very dangerous time. The entity, it's getting active and will continue to do so until it's food source is exhausted."

"You're coming with us," George said.

"No, no. That's out of the question, I'm afraid." He had a brief coughing spell, then wiped his mouth. "I'm too sick, you see. I wouldn't have the strength for a trip through hyperspace . . . no, I'll stay here. But you young people, you need to get out before it comes back and this machine should do nicely."

"You saw what that contraption did to Fabrini," Elizabeth said, "and you still want to use it?"

"We have to try, don't we?" George said.

She just shook her head, disgusted by the idea.

Cushing explained what had happened to Fabrini in all its gruesome details. Greenberg listened, nodding the whole while.

"Well . . . I would hazard a guess that whatever vortex the alien opened was not a good one. This machine, its purpose, is no doubt to project matter between dimensions and across the void of stars . . . but we'll never know what the alien was attempting. Maybe he had it trained on the fifth dimension or the twentieth for that matter. I can hazard a guess that this awful place your friend stepped into was alien both physically and vitally. A place where matter and energy are not as we understand them."

He explained that Fabrini's basic atomic structure was probably particulated, that he underwent something of an interdimensional metamorphosis. His molecules underwent a matter-energy transformation and then back again. A phase in matter, like water going from ice to liquid to steam, back to ice again. Fabrini dematerialized and then re-materialized, matter to energy and then energy back to matter. And probably in the blink of an eye. Except that when teleported to that other dimension, his atoms were re-

assembled according to the physical laws of that nightmare dimension . . . a place where your limbs could be disconnected by miles, yet be connected. A place where your consciousness, through some freakish set of variables, could become disassociated from your body.

"But he was still alive," Menhaus said, swallowing. "We could hear him . . . his mind was still alive."

"Yes, yes, terrible. Again, we can only speculate. Unlike his body which was disorganized atomically . . . his mind must have remained intact. The energy of his thoughts, his consciousness, were somehow divorced from his physical self and will probably exist forever in one form or another."

That just about took George's breath away. Menhaus looked like he wanted to be sick. The idea of Fabrini existing until the end of time or beyond it as a conscious, aware, screaming cloud of atoms . . . it was unthinkable.

Greenberg said that time, as well as matter, must be horribly distorted in that place. While only moments passed here, thousands of years must have passed there. The best Greenberg could come up with for that ghostly image of Fabrini that drifted back out of the field was that it must have been some sort of reflection . . . one caught somewhere between the ethereal and the corporeal, but with a highly unstable molecular structure. Like a shadow, he said, the way shadows must be in that place of deranged physics.

"The Fog-Devil," George said, plugging a cigarette in his mouth and giving it flame, "I'm guessing that it's not native to this place, right? That maybe it slipped out of some other dimension, something like that."

Greenberg nodded. "I suspect it to be of extradimensional origin. I can't . . . no, I can't even concieve of the sort of place where such a creature could be natural. Maybe that place your friend went. Regardless, it is a living and sentient being, I think. A sort of biological firmament of anti-matter that exists by ingesting or assimiliating fields of electrical energy. If you can imagine a nebulous, radioactive mass of cellular anti-matter that feeds on the raw, untapped electrical energy of thinking minds . . . actually sucks them dry, then you'd be close. Anti-matter with force, intellect, and direction . . . dear God, what an abomination."

"It came today," Menhaus said. "It got one of our friends and Elizabeth's aunt . . . but it'll come again, won't it? I mean, you said in your letter that it cycles, that it builds up."

"Yes, it's cyclical in nature, I think. It's pretty pointless to apply third-dimensional reason or rationale to something that technically cannot exist in the first place . . . but, yes, it seems to be cyclical." Greenberg had to rest a moment. All the excitement and talking were taxing him. "If you know the stories of the *Cyclops* and the *Korsund,* then you understand the destructive, deadly power of this creature. I believe it shows irregularly, maybe not for ten years or fifty, but that when it does, it leaves nothing alive with a rational brain. It hones in on the electrical fields of these thinking minds and chews them down to the marrow, if you will."

"You couldn't hide from something like that," Cushing said. "It could find you anywhere, anytime."

Greenberg sighed. "Yes, exactly."

"Something that eats minds," George said. "Incredible."

"That's why you need to get out of here," Greenberg warned them. "I don't think it'll come back until tonight . . . but when it does, well, it won't leave any of us. If you understand my meaning."

George exhaled a stream of smoke. "And you want us to just leave you behind?"

"Yes. I'm too sick to make the journey. There's nothing that could be done for me even if I did make it back home . . . so I'll stay here. I'll stay here and get a good look at this Fog-Devil of ours before it kills me. Satisfy some scientific curiosity, you might say."

George just shook his head. Selfless acts were to be applauded, but suicidal acts were just plain stupid and waiting for this monstrosity to pick your mind clean like a skull was just suicide. Plain and simple.

Cushing said, "How can this thing exist? An anti-matter entity in a matter world like this? I mean, this has to be a matter world like the one we left or we would have ceased to exist the moment we stepped into it . . . right?"

"Yes, yes exactly. I believe the entity must have some sort of membrane that protects it, a sort of field of energy that contains and protects it much like skin protects us. Is that matter or anti-matter or some sort of subatomic material unknown to us . . . who can say? If I could hazard a wild, irrational leap of logic here," Greenberg said to them, "I would say that this creature not only emits radiation, but is radioactive by nature. That maybe where it comes from, life is based on radioactive isotopes just as life as we know it is based on the carbon atom. But the radiation of this thing . . . it's probably a completely alien sort of radiation that we can only guess it."

"It kills all the same," George said.

There was no arguing with that. Nor was there any arguing with the fact that if they didn't either get their asses out of Dimension X in a real hurry or find a way to destroy that thing, then they were going to learn all about it first hand.

Cushing said, "If there was some way to shoot it full of matter. That would probably destroy it or knock it back where it came from."

Greenberg said, "Interesting idea. Exactly how do you put out a fire?"

"With water," George said.

"Or sometimes you build another fire and let them burn into each other and cancel each other out," Greenberg explained. "I think if we had, say, an atomic bomb we could do it. A bomb like that would deliver the sort of explosive punch to disrupt the thing's membrane and at the same time flood it with matter. And not just any matter, but radioactive matter. Hence, my analogy . . . fire burning out fire."

"Why not just a conventional explosive?" George said.

But Greenberg shook his head. "By itself, I don't honestly believe it would be enough. Such a force might momentarily disrupt that field or membrane, but it wouldn't deliver the knock-out punch . . . irradiated material. I think we need to saturate its guts, if you will, with a burst of radioactive material, fissionable material. That would . . . *burn* it out, I think. Dissipate it, kill it. Not that it could know death as we understand it."

Pulling off his cigarette, George said, "How about a dirty bomb?"

Greenberg looked confused and Elizabeth, being from a different time, was just totally lost. The world Greenberg had left behind back in the 1980s didn't have any worries about terrorists acquiring nuclear waste and weaponizing it. But Cushing and Menhaus were getting it just fine.

“Sure,” George said. “A dirty bomb. A conventional explosive hooked up to barrels of radioactive waste. We could do it, too. There’s a ship back in the weeds, a freighter loaded with barrels of radioactive waste. We wire some explosives to that . . . a lot of explosives . . . you got the mother of all dirty bombs.”

George explained to Greenberg about the C-130 and all those crates of pre-packaged satchel charges. How he had been an engineer in the army and he knew how to use them. Both he and Menhaus had done some blasting at construction sites. They could make this happen.

Greenberg was silent for a time. “Yes, yes, I think that would do it . . . just understand the implications of such a weapon. It would spread a deadly cloud of fallout . . . you would need to be far away when it went.”

“I could set a time fuse on it,” George said. “That would give us the time we need.”

But Greenberg shook his head. “No, that wouldn’t work. The only way we could know the entity was coming would be by the Geiger Counter. It picks up the creature’s radioactive emanations. And we would want the bomb to go off when the entity was right on top of it . . . that’s the best chance we have for success. So, there’s only one possible solution. You rig your bombs and I wait with the Geiger Counter, when it comes, I blow it.”

Again, they tried arguing with Greenberg, but he refused to see reason. He honestly wanted to get a look at the thing. It was more than curiosity, it was an obsession with him.

“Just understand one thing,” he told them. “Matter and anti-matter do not mix. When a particle meets its anti-particle, well, they tend to annihilate each other completely, knocking each other out of existence. And as they do so, immense amounts of pure energy are released.”

“An anti-matter bomb,” Cushing said.

“Exactly. If our explosion rips this membrane, then matter and anti-matter will collide in an explosion that will be devastating beyond comprehension.”

He laid it out for them, how a colleague of his once said that an anti-matter bomb would make a 50 megaton hydrogen bomb — about ten-thousand times as powerful as what was dropped on Hiroshima — look like a firecracker. A nuclear bomb, Greenberg said, only converts a small fraction of warhead mass to energy, but matter/anti-matter annihilation converts almost total mass-to-energy.

“Something like that . . . well, it could boil this sea to steam.” He shook his head. “You would need to pass through the vortex before I fired it.”

“It’ll be dark in about six hours,” Elizabeth announced.

“There’s no way we could arm that ship and then get ourselves to the vortex in time,” George said.

Greenberg smiled. “Not unless you had a speedboat.”

Cushing didn't like any of it and he said so.

None of them liked Greenberg's plan. What they wanted to do was quit wasting time and get on that speedboat of his and get out to the Sea of Mists and see what the compass showed them. The idea of letting Greenberg commit suicide for the sake of science was just unthinkable. Even the instinct to save their own asses wasn't enough to make them jump at it, to leave this poor old man at the mercy of that . . . horror.

Even Elizabeth didn't like it. "Please Mr. Greenberg . . . this is all ridiculous. You have to come with us."

But Greenberg would not hear of it. "If there was a chance for me, dear, I would do just that. But . . . well I rather doubt this body has more than a few days left in it at most. I'm sick and you all know that. I'm terribly sick. Look at it this way," he said sincerely. "I'm staying either way. If George can rig this bomb of his, then my death will be quick and painless, I won't suffer anymore. Given that the alternative is the Fog-Devil turning my bones to liquid and my brain to soup, I'd say it's my best chance. My death will be quick and maybe we can cancel that creature out of existence at the same time."

After that, there was no more arguing.

"Let's do this," Menhaus said.

28

"Jesus," Menhaus said when he saw the speedboat, "it's a fucking cigarette boat. A racing boat."

George thought it looked like a rocket. It was long and red and streamlined. It had to be nearly thirty feet in length and most of that was its nose which looked like a missile. Menhaus was real excited about it. When they got the lifeboat up to it, he jumped into the cigarette boat's cockpit without hesitation.

"Drug runners use these babies in the Florida Keys," he told them. "They can outrun Coast Guard cutters. I bet this baby can break a hundred miles an hour at full bore."

Cushing just had one question as he looked at all the gauges in their anodized trim rings on the dash: "Can you pilot it? Can anybody pilot this sled?"

Menhaus was nodding. "Yeah, I think so. I've been on a few of these as a passenger, but, yeah, I can can make her go."

George was thinking that the boat looked to be in nice shape. No encrustation or weeds as yet. It looked pretty new . . . save for a bloodstain on one of the white leather seats that he did not want to speculate on.

Menhaus was popping hatches, checking things out inside.

"You looking for drugs?" Cushing asked him.

"No . . . Jesus, look at that engine. A five-hundred horse Mercruiser coupled to a Bravo. Damn."

Menhaus explained that when you raced these boats, you generally did it with three people. One guy doing the steering, another on the throttle, and another doing the navigating. He said it had a V-hull which made it plane over the top of the water.

"Okay," he said, once the others were aboard and their equipment was loaded. He turned the key and punched the starter. The boat shook, sounded like it would never go, then the engines kicked in and all that power beneath them was thrumming.

"You feel up to playing navigator?" he asked Greenberg.

Greenberg honestly didn't look up to playing anything, but he nodded.

When everyone was in their seats, they cast off the lifeboat and Menhaus took them through the weeds and fog. In ten minutes they were out into open water.

And their destiny.

29

Getting the satchel charges was child's play.

The fog was still thick, it never really thinned much, but sometimes it was more transparent than at other times. In the glow of the fog and what passed for daylight in that place, George and Menhaus and Cushing quickly unpacked the crates of satchel charges. They went about it in a very business-like manner, trying not to think about Gosling or Marx though feeling them everywhere in the C-130 like maybe their ghosts had chosen this spot to haunt until time itself ground to a withering halt. Inside the crates there were thirty cases of satchel charges with two satchels per case, giving them a grand total of sixty charges.

"Hot damn," George said. "This is going to be fireworks like you've never seen before."

He told Cushing, out of range of Greenberg's ears, that this much explosive . . . and he planned on using it all . . . would not only blow those drums of waste wide open and spit their poison for a mile in every direction, but it would probably turn that freighter into matchsticks at the same time.

When it was loaded, they ventured first to the *Ptolemy* where Greenberg had extra fuel. They filled the cigarette boat's 100 gallon tank up and siphoned off another thirty gallons into plastic tanks. By that time, there was very little room to sit or stand in the cigarette boat.

Next stop, the freighter.

As they brought the cases of satchel charges up the boarding ladder, George was struck by a queasy feeling in his stomach. Part of it was that ship, he knew, and everything that had happened there. Even without it, that derelict was like a floating tomb. But it was more than just the ship or any of that.

And you know what it is, he told himself. *You know damn well what it is. Things are going too smoothly here. Everything's fitting into place like it's pre-arranged and you're just waiting for the bottom to drop. Because in this goddamn place, the bottom always drops sooner or later.*

But he tried not to think.

Thinking was not a luxury he could afford at that moment. Night was coming soon and there was a lot to be done before the light faded. So he did not think of the *Mara Corday* and the positively bizarre chain of events that led him to this place on this day, because if he had . . . he figured he might burst out crying or start laughing. Maybe both at the same time.

"That's the works," Menhaus said. "Let's rock and roll."

They unpacked the individual satchel charges and respective priming assemblies. Then they got down to work. The satchel charges — M183 demolition charges, in army-speak — each contained some 16 blocks of C4 and five feet of det cord. The real work was breaking open the orange plastic crates that contained the drums of radioactive waste. That was a job unto itself. An hour later, they had some sixteen containers opened, thirty-two neon-yellow barrels ready. George and Menhaus went about arming the satchels, wiring them with primercord and blasting caps. When they had all sixty satchels ready,

they attached them to the barrels using duct tape and rope, something the freighter had no lack of. After that, George connected six-inches of time fuse to each of the priming assemblies, leaving the time fuse and fuse igniters hanging outside the satchels. They they wired all the fuse igniters together with wire and tied a rope to that.

When Greenberg was ready, all he would have to do is pull the rope . . . that would fire all the igniters simultaneously.

"And scratch one Fog-Devil," George said. "Hopefully."

"And one old man, too," Cushing said.

"Try not to think about it, man."

But Cushing was thinking about it. They were all thinking about it and trying not to, trying to turn their hearts very hard because how else were you going to get through something like that? How would you live with yourself later?

George went over it all one more time. It had been a few years since he'd wired any C4, but it looked right. The satchel charges were designed that so just about any idiot could make them go boom. So he went over all his connections once and then twice to be sure.

About the time he finished, a figure stepped out from behind one of the skids. Bent over with a shotgun in their hands, there was no mistaking who it was.

"Saks," George said and that single word was like a knife in his belly.

Saks. Yeah, he was plenty to contend with just about any time, but now, well, he was just a little worse. He stood there, his face pale and blotchy, one eye narrowed to a slit and the other wide and glistening like a peeled grape. The front of his shirt was brown and crusty with dried blood. He was grinning and that grin was all teeth like something from a storybook that ate children.

"Having a little party, eh?" Saks said. "A little going away party? Fireworks and everything? Well, don't that beat all? Don't it . . . just . . . fucking . . . beat . . . all?"

George swallowed, but there was no spit in his mouth. "Saks . . . Jesus, you're still alive."

Maybe that was the wrong thing to say, but there was probably no right thing to say. Not now. Saks was insane and there was no getting around that. He was sick and wounded and insane. And if that wasn't bad enough, he had a shotgun in his hands. The barrel was rusty, but it looked like it wasn't that rusty.

A gun? Saks had a gun? Of course he had a gun, George knew. Guns find people like Saks and people like Saks always find guns. Same way rich men always find money and poor ones never get a break. Saks probably found it on the ship somewhere. The really crazy thing was that Saks was still alive. Gutshot like that, he should have been dead or dying at the very least, curled up somewhere like a road-struck dog. But that blood on his shirt was old. He didn't seem to be bleeding anymore.

How could that be?

He took it right in the belly, George thought. *I saw it. He took it right in the fucking belly.*

Cushing and Elizabeth were standing there now.

It was hard to say what was on their faces. They didn't seem really surprised, just unhappy. Both of them were probably beyond the point where anything in this damn place could really surprise them.

"Why did you run off?" Cushing asked him. "Why did you hide from us when we looked for you? We were just trying to help you, Saks."

Saks laughed or wheezed . . . he did something, made some sort of rattling, choking sound that might have been mirth. Might have been, but wasn't. His right eye, the wide one, was simply blank and scary looking. "Is that what you wanted to do, Cushing? Is that it? You sure you just didn't want to finish what Menhaus started?"

"C'mon, Saks, you know me better than that."

George was staring without meaning to, way you might stare at a mad dog knowing it was certainly the wrong thing to do. But . . . but Saks's neck was covered in something. Where those weird sores had been the other day, the ones Saks was always scratching, there was some kind of spreading, tumorous growth. It looked pink and furry like moss might look on Mars. Something made of tiny, wiry hairs.

Cilia, George thought, *like on an ameba.*

And there was something under his shirt, something bulging and obscene-looking. Something that did not belong. Whatever it was, it was *moving*.

"Where's Menhaus?" Saks said in a low, grating voice. "I wanna see the fucker who killed me."

And that's what he said. Like maybe he had died, but came back just to fuck up this little party they were planning. George didn't know what had happened to him, but it didn't take a real jump of logic to connect Fabrini's story of Saks eating that discolored salt pork from the *Cyclops* and the sudden outbreak of sores on his body and what was happening now. It was an easy path to follow.

"So what do you dipfucks got in mind here?" Saks wanted to know. "Are you planning on sacrificing the old man to your Fog-Devil, George? Is that it?"

"No, we-"

"Nice work there, George, nice-looking bomb you've got there. You would've made one hell of a terrorist. Let's see here . . . if I pull that cord you got rigged up, in about . . . what? Sixty seconds, maybe, we all go up? Something like that?"

George felt a trickle of sweat slide down the back of his neck. "Saks," he said. "We . . . we rigged that to kill the thing . . ."

"Menhaus!" Saks cried out. "You don't show your ass in the next ten seconds, I'm gonna have to start killing people! You hear me?" He leveled the shotgun at Cushing. "I'll start with Cushing . . . you hear me? You hear me, you slimy little fuck?"

"No," Elizabeth said, stepping in-between the shotgun and Cushing. "No, that's enough. No more killing. I can't bear any more killing."

Saks chuckled. "Does blood offend you, honey?"

"Yes."

George didn't believe that, but it sounded good. Sounded real good and looking into those sad green eyes of hers you could almost believe it. But it wasn't true. Elizabeth wasn't a cold-blooded killer or anything, but she was a survivor. That was for sure. Part of her was very callous and when necessary, she had a mean streak a mile wide.

"Okay, here's how it works," Saks said. "Menhaus don't show . . . and I don't think he's gonna show . . . I kill your snatch, Cushing, then I kill you. What do you think, George? You got a problem with that?"

Greenberg just sat there on the deck, looking old and used up, maybe not liking

any of this but too far gone himself to do much about it.

"Menhaus! You think I'm fucking around, you think this is-"

And that's about as far as he got. For something hit him in the back of the head and he pitched forward, dropping the shotgun. Cushing moved fast and kicked the gun away from Saks's clutching fingers. There was a wrench laying on the deck. A pipe wrench. Saks was barely conscious.

Menhaus waltzed purposely out from around the aft cabin.

"Good shot," George told him.

"Fucking guy's like a tick," Menhaus said. "Stepping on him ain't enough, you got to burn him out."

Saks moaned and George saw what he was going to do seconds before he did it. Saks was feigning here, pretending to be nearly unconscious. But he wasn't. He was inching himself over toward the pull rope for the satchel fuses. He made it maybe an inch closer and George kicked him in the head. Punted him hard enough to make the game-winning field goal.

This time, Saks was out cold.

Menhaus, with no emotion, simply picked-up the wrench and went over to Saks and swung it with everything he had. There was a sickly wet and hollow popping sound. Menhaus hit him again with everything he had and then stood up, studying the gore and clotted hair on the end of the wrench. He tossed it aside with a shudder like he couldn't believe what he'd just done.

Nobody said anything about it.

And Menhaus himself had absolutely no comment.

"You had better go," Greenberg told them, clutching the Geiger Counter to him.

George put the end of the pull rope on his lap. "You know what to do," he said. "But I'll ask you one more time if you don't want to come with us."

Greenberg appreciated that they all seemed to care about him, that they did not make this decision to leave him easily. It was tough on them. So much inhumanity and death had been forced on them in this awful place, the idea of willingly sacrificing one of their number was unthinkable. Yet, they had to do it. Greenberg knew it and so did they.

But it didn't make the parting any easier.

Even Elizabeth said, "Please, Mr. Greenberg, think about it."

But he just shook his head. "You better go. There's not much time. It'll be dark in just over an hour, I'm guessing. Please, get moving."

George looked at him one last time, mumbled a goodbye and Menhaus did the same. They did not look back.

"Mr. Greenberg, I-"

"On your way, Elizabeth," he told her. "Your uncle and I were friends, you know. What I'm doing, I'm doing for you and for him and for all the others that thing has killed. And, yes, out of curiosity."

Cushing led her away towards the boarding ladder.

And that was it.

That was the last anyone saw of Greenberg.

30

In the cigarette boat, the ship's graveyard and its attendant weed were easy to transverse. There were a few scary moments in the fog when Menhaus slammed into an overturned hull and nearly pitched everyone overboard or when he nearly steered them into the side of a tanker, but other than that it went pretty smoothly.

In thirty minutes, they were free of the weed, moving at a good clip through one of the channels, cutting through the fog and keeping their fingers crossed. They had everything they needed and if they couldn't find the vortex, then it would all end out in the Sea of Mists. Maybe through the offices of the local wildlife or maybe when Greenberg pulled the cord and let loose his anti-matter bomb, as he called it.

As they pushed further away from the ship's graveyard, George was thinking that just about anything would be preferable to having your mind vacuumed clean by the Fog-Devil. Just about anything.

The channel began to twist and turn and Menhaus lowered their speed a bit, not wanting to, but knowing that they couldn't afford a catastrophe. Not even a little one. Darkness was coming. They could all see that. The fog was getting verse dense and heavy like rainclouds fallen to earth.

George had the compass out. "If Greenberg's right, we should make the general area of the vortex in twenty, thirty minutes after we get out into that sea."

"Especially with this baby," Menhaus said, loving his new toy.

"That is," Cushing cautioned. "If we don't get turned in circles in this goddamn fog." But George didn't think they would.

Elizabeth was doing the navigating now and that was a good thing. She seemed to know her way through the channels pretty well. And George wondered how many trips she had made like this through the weed with her uncle, searching out that elusive trapdoor, that escape route from the misting world of the Dead Sea. She told Menhaus which channel to take, when he had gone too far, her eyes on the fog like maybe she could see through it.

Then finally, ultimately, all those acres of green and rotting weed to either side finally opened up, fell away, and there was open water before them, little islands of seaweed drifting about, but nothing like what they had just left.

"Hold onto your hats," Menhaus said and edged the throttle back, picking up speed and parting those gelid waters.

"Not too fast," Elizabeth told him. "There's derelicts out here, too. Lots of things in the water."

The mist started gathering around them in blankets and sheaths, just impenetrable and boiling and viscid. It was so damp it left a wet sheen on their faces. And George could remember all too well the days spent drifting and rowing through its murky depths. Jesus, he got to thinking, how had they even made it this far?

Night was coming and there was danger in that.

George remembered that the last time night had fallen on them, they had been on the C-130. Then the squid had attacked and then . . . well, he wasn't going to think about it. He wasn't going to think about any of the badness because there was only the here and

now and that was enough. He could feel something building in him, same way he'd felt it when they were nearing the ship's graveyard . . . a sense of excitement, of anticipation. They were getting near to something. He could really feel it.

And as he felt it, he knew that there was a motion to their little group now, a building psychic energy, a physical momentum and it was carrying them forward to something.

He looked down at the compass.

The needle was still dead, but soon, soon there would be movement. He felt it right down in his belly. He turned away from the wind the boat was creating and lit a cigarette in cupped hands. Looking at Cushing, he smiled and Cushing smiled back and then something happened.

It happened very quickly.

So fast, George could only watch it happen. Speechless, helpless, he saw it, but could do nothing about it. Something dropped down out of the mist, something shiny like fishing line and looped around Cushing's throat. Like a noose it swung down and took him, yanked him up out of the boat and into the mist. Whether it was the speed of the boat or the strength of whatever sinister puppet master that worked that line, Cushing was gone fast.

In the blink of an eye.

Elizabeth made one wild dive at him, but she was far too late and she went over the side and vanished in the fog.

They heard her scream.

George shouted.

Menhaus brought the boat around, wanting to know what in the hell had happened. But George had no answers. Nothing tangible to even tell him. The running lights on the bow of the cigarette boat illuminated the fog, cut only ten or twelve feet into it.

"Elizabeth!" George called out. "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

His voice echoed out through the fog and he thought for one terrifying minute that something out there was mocking his words, but it was just Elizabeth. Menhaus pushed the cigarette boat in the direction of her voice.

There.

They could see her.

Bobbing in that gelatinous, stinking water, looking positively frantic.

And with good reason, George soon saw.

There was something poised above her in the fog, maybe fifteen feet up. Something huge and amorphous and shadowy. Something wriggling and creeping and riding the mists like a moth. But it was no moth, it was no bird, it was something else. He could see a network of those shiny looking threads descending onto Elizabeth and those threads or webs or whatever they were looked alive, looked like they were coiling and looping with a flowing serpentine motion.

Elizabeth screamed one more time as those threads snared her up.

George brought up the flare gun, was going to punch a burning hole through that nightmare, but at the last moment, he hesitated. Hesitated because a form dropped out of the mist, something that looked to be made of drooping gray rags and motheaten shrouds.

Something dangling on one of those wires, like a marionette that was dropped down accidentally.

But it was no marionette.

It was Cushing. Only he had been reduced to a skeleton or something quite near one. George saw what he thought was vertebrae, maybe a gleaming knob of rib or femur. A sort of fleshless face. But that was all. Whatever nightmare mockery of a man it had been, it was quickly yanked back up into the mist by that puppet master, that thing floating up there.

Elizabeth was pulled up out of the water, wrapped in those living threads and both George and Menhaus caught a momentary glimpse of something immense and leggy wth gleaming blue-black skin. And that was all they saw, just a suggestion of form and intent, a hint of some immense insect puppeteer. And eyes. George thought maybe he saw a cluster of wet, pink eyes that looked like a dozen slimy tennis balls stuffed in a nylon.

Then Elizabeth was gone.

Maybe it was reflexive action, but George jerked the trigger on the flare gun and it went off with a dull popping. It cut a red path up into the fog overhead like the trail of a tracer bullet. And then it exploded up there with a shower of orange and yellow sparks. Something made a shrieking, squealing sound and George saw that thing scuttling away up into the mist, looking oddly like some bloated and fleshy parachute with two jumpers trailing behind it, Cushing and Elizabeth.

And that was horrible.

But what was maybe a little worse was that in the glow of the descending flare, in its flickering red glare, he could see that there were others up there. Humped things with maybe twenty or thirty legs creeping along some network of webs up in the mist, dancing away from the light.

Cushing's gone and so is Elizabeth, a voice was telling George, a wild and hysterical voice, *just like you're going to be if you don't get your ass in gear!*

"Bring it around," George told Menhaus.

Menhaus just stared at him dumbly. "What?"

"Bring this fucker around!"

Menhaus did, gunning the throttle and bringing them around in an arc, creating a surging wake and then pushing them forward into the mist again. George was hoping, praying that they had not gotten turned around. He slid another flare into the gun and waited.

Waited for what came next.

Not letting himself think about what he had just seen or what kind of spiderish monstrosity could spin a floating web up in the mist and make Cushing look like he'd been dunked in a bath of acid in under a minute.

They kept going, pushing on and on.

And then George looked at the compass.

The needle was moving.

31

The needle on the Geiger Counter was moving, too.

It shuddered, fell back, began to move steadily upwards with a lazy sort of roll and Greenberg just watched it, feeling tense but exhilerated. This was it then. No more toying about with mathematical equations on paper, no more speculating on the vagaries of interdimensional physics, no more hiding in lead-lined vaults and coughing up blood and vomiting and watching his hair fall out from radiation poisoning.

This was it.

This was really it.

The thing was coming. Coming for him and there wasn't a single force born of man, nature, or God that could stop it. Stop this breathing, hissing abomination that could chew through time and space like a maggot through dead meat.

Don't get emotional and imaginative, Greenberg warned himself. *You are an observer, a scientist. Keep that in mind. Do not look at this thing and tremble. Do not let it see your fear.*

But it was too late for that and Greenberg damn well knew it. For the Fog-Devil had been smelling his fear for some time know. It had been licking at his brain for weeks, gnawing on his thoughts and sucking the salt from his subconscious with a growing, impossible hunger. Yes, carefully working him and savoring him, unwrapping the candied layers of his psyche and now it had found the creamy, rich nougat at the center . . . *fear.* Mindless, mad, human fear and such a thing was a luxury to this Devil of Fogs and anti-space. It had marked Greenberg with its wasting breath, sweetening him up, letting him ripen like a succulent grape on a vine, and now it would claim him.

Now it would eat his mind raw.

Easy, easy, he cautioned himself.

But it was not easy. Not at all, because the Geiger Counter was clicking away now, the analog meter jumping and falling rapidly, showing a high-end reading of three hundred counts per second. Well beyond the safety level of Roentgens. Greenberg watched the needle . . . yes, five hundred, seven hundred, up and up, not falling at all now. The clickings were so fast now they sounded like the static from an old radio. The analog needle was pegged now and Greenberg knew he was being inundated by a crackling swarm of charged subatomic particles that were burning right through him.

Dear God, dear God.

He was suddenly gripped with an almost hysterical, superstitious terror that was building inside him like plumes of poison gas. And the fog . . . dear Christ the fog, *look at the fog . . .*

It was being consumed by a sort of thrumming luminosity that was filling it with light and motion and flickering shapes. Yes, now it was exploding with a gushing, polychromatic brilliance that was running like wet paint, seeming to drip and ooze and puddle, diffusing now like ink dropped in water. Yes, it was colors and prisms and a spreading dark vortex-adumbration of depthless black matter that was bright and blinding . . . deranged geometrical shapes and living polyhedrons and, yes, more, more all the time. The fog was fog and yet was not fog. It was liquid and solid, then gas, then a roiling

putrescence expanding like a balloon blown with filth.

Greenberg could feel it, yes, feel it down deep, chewing into his mind, filling his rioting brain with things unknown, unseen, and blasphemous.

His hand tightened on the pull cord of the dirty bomb.

Hesitated.

Not yet, not yet, not just yet. I must see it, I must see it, *God help me but I must . . . see . . . this . . . nightmare . . .*

But some gods were not meant to be looked upon by mortal eyes and Greenberg's eyes were unclean, impure, and he could feel a wave of heat reaching out to burn his eyes out of their sockets. Waves of agony shot through his brain and blood ran from his nose and ears, but he would see, he would see this thing, God yes, he would look upon it and know it.

The fog was not fog now, it was flesh, blubbery radiant flesh that was pink and yellow veined by squirming purple arteries that pulsed and undulated like tentacles. It was a huge mass of radioactive smog that was flesh that was smog that was misting, dripping flesh that was alive, alive, alive, filling the sky and swallowing the world with a mouth that was a black, seeking nebula. Yes, the Dead Sea was an incubator and the fog was a placenta that was sheering now with a ripping sound, with an eruption of slime that was not slime but colors, vibrant and violent auras of colors that filled Greenberg's mind with a rumbling white noise. For he was seeing colors that he had never seen before, smelling them and tasting them, feeling them ignite him with a freezing/burning wind that was blowing from the malignant irradiated wastes and radioactive bone heaps beyond the edges of the known universe.

He screamed then.

Screamed his mind to quivering jelly and vomited out his guts in white-hot coils.

The Fog-Devil was birthed in a nuclear fallout of blistering ice and radioactive fire and frost and acid, an effusion of strontium-90 and radium and unstable cellular anti-matter. Greenberg saw it, was allowed to see it coming at him in a boiling flux of nerve gas and chlorine mist, methane and supercharged split atoms of hydrogen . . . a slithering, worming multi-dimensional obscenity. Yes, a breath of living cosmic darkness, a translucent and larval incandescence, a primal chaos of decaying cadaveric gulfs. It became a bile of screaming fungal pigments and an immense, electric wraith skeletoned by a neural network of synapses flapping with fleshy rags infused by an incinerating moonlight. Maybe it was a million writhing and eyeless alien graveworms pissing jets of color and dissolving into a noxious atomic steam. And maybe it was a cauldron of smoldering entrails and maybe it was a sentient plexus of mewling plasma, a creeping and hissing thermonuclear afterbirth born in some searing anti-world of radionuclides and plutonium.

Yes, maybe it was all these things and none of them.

A living furnace of shadow-matter that had come to devour the world, the universe, something that was pulling gravity inside-out and collapsing time-space in its wake.

Greenberg saw what his mind told him was a vast, living, breathing honeycomb descending on him, fluttering and blurring, unable to hold its shape or form. It was blown with noxious clouds of searing, scalding vapors and incremating heat. And his last true

sensory impression was of . . . *eyes.*

What his disintegrating brain told him were eyes . . . colossal, luminous-red globular orbs leering from nests of wiry tentacles like whips or eyelashes. Eyes that were steaming like melting reactor cores, burning holes through the dimensional fabric and turning Greenberg's brain to hot, bubbling mud.

Eyes, eyes, eyes . . . a million eyes, a billion eyes staring out from a slime of protoplasmic mist.

Eyes that destroy, eyes that devour, eyes that violate and consume and burn, burn, burn, oh dear Christ the burning burning burning static breath . . .

Eyes that were black holes and quasars and the ravening charnel wastes of dead-end space. Depthless crystalline eyes that burned with a green smoke, chromatic graveyards and diseased moons that washed him down in cosmic rays and gamma rays and phosphorescent streams of cremating atoms that found his mind and gnawed the meat from it and sucked its blood and vacuumed-free its marrow and gnawed its charred bones.

Yes, it found Greenberg and Greenberg pleased it, filled it, satisfied its relentless and voracious appetite. He was burnt offerings beneath the fission of its nuclear winter breath.

Greenberg's flesh became bubbling wax.

His bones liquified like melted candlesticks.

His skull became a boiling, steaming pot of cold, white radioactive jelly.

And even as his mind was stripped to bone and his muscles and nerve endings and anatomy became running tallow, he felt his hand jerk the cord.

Heard from some distant room, the noose drop over the Fog-Devil, that extradimen-sional abomination, that distortion out of space, out of time.

"Okay," George was saying, "veer to the left, to the left . . ."

Menhaus jerked the wheel and they went too far, the needle of the compass swinging far to the right and almost stopping George's heart with it. But without being told, he brought the boat back until the needle was pointing straight up, attracted by an unknown magnetic influence.

"Hold it there now," George said. "We're moving straight at whatever it is . . ."

Behind them, far, far behind them there was a rumbling sound like thunder. A deafening hollow boom. The fog behind them was lit with a flickering green light.

They knew what it was.

The anti-matter bomb. The collision of dimensions, the big bang.

Seconds now, mere seconds before that shockwave found them, atomized them into mist.

Oh, it was a breathless time. A frenzied time. An insane time. A time when all and everything were balanced on the head of some celestial pin and George could feel the world trembling, waiting to fall, readying itself for that great, godless fall to the pavement far below. He could almost feel that pavement rushing up at him, feel himself impacting with a splatter of blood and bones and memory.

The compass needle began to spin.

George's heart leaped.

Menhaus muttered, "I think, I think . . ."

George held the teleporter in his hands. They were shaking badly and he almost dropped it. He held it steady, placed one hand on the scope and the boat began to vibrate, static electricity snapped and crackled all around him making his hair stand on end. The generator hummed, the scope shot out a blue pencil of light that was refracted, boosted, amplified, turned back upon itself and a stream of blue pulsing, ionzed particles shot out into the fog . . . made the fog glow and seem to momentarily freeze like frost on a window pane.

And then, then . . .

And then there it was, the fog within a fog, a breath of interdimensional lunacy surging out at them. A vortex, a hole, a tear . . . and they were plowing right into it, Menhaus jerking the throttle down out of sheer exhileration. There was a blinding flash of light that knocked them right out of their seats and a sickening sense of falling, of drifting, of tumbling through white space and cosmic noise . . . and, yes, a sensation of speed and distance and time and particulated matter.

And then blackness.

It lasted for less than a minute, but when they opened their eyes and found their bodies, they were gasping for breath. Coughing, gagging, delirious and disoriented. George made it to his knees and crashed back down onto the deck of the cigarette boat.

Panic, just panic . . . that weird, inexplicable sense of pressure and lack of it, of fullness and emptiness and countless leagues of nothing. Then even that was gone and they were breathing air, good clean air that filled their lungs and revitalized them.

Panting, George sat up.

It was black, blacker than black.

The boat was rocking as small, choppy waves bumped it to and fro. And overhead, overhead George could see-

Stars.

EPILOGUE

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

1

IN THE END THERE was irony.

Irony in that after all those days or weeks spent in that other place, that bad place, they came out in what George figured was the Atlantic and they were just as lost as ever. When they got their bearings and decided they were actually home, really and honestly home, George turned on one of the cockpit lights and looked at the compass. It was pointing to what he figured was magnetic north. No deviation, no nothing.

And when that happened and the wonder of it all had faded, if only momentarily, George read the compass and pointed his finger. “That way’s east, Olly, that’s where land will be.”

So Menhaus fired up the cigarette boat and they headed east, the cigarette boat glad to be back in the sea, the real sea, back in water it understood. In reacted in kind, firing off into the night like a rocket, cutting through those black waters and kicking up a gout of spray in its wake.

George turned on the radio.

What he was hoping for was a station. Any station. News or music or anything that would tell them, yes, you’re back in the right century. But all they got was static. Maybe it was the radio and maybe atmospheric disturbance and maybe, just maybe, the worse sort of portent.

“We’re home,” Menhaus kept saying. “I know we’re home.”

George knew they were, too. The only question was, what year it might be.

But there would be time for that, wouldn’t there?

Because right then the air smelled salty and fresh and cool, no fog or stagnance or floating seaweed. No, nothing but the sea and the night and the boat beneath them taking them to a place either they would know or to one where they and their boat would be freaks, out of place and out of time. Regardless, breaking free of the Dead Sea, there was hope. It burned brightly and their souls burned with it. With the lifting of that perpetual fog, even in the darkness and starlight, they felt free, absolutely unbound. Around them they could feel the spaces and distance and it was good to be free of the fog and its claustrophobia.

But, there was irony.

The next day the sun burned hot and the sea became a mirror and the heat was almost unbearable. George had forgotten just how bright the sun was. By late afternoon, the cigarette boat had exhausted the last of the fuel and there was nothing to do but drift and hope.

When night came, George fell asleep.

Maybe for an hour, maybe less. But when he woke up, Menhaus was shaking him roughly.

“Wake up, Sleeping fucking Beauty! Wake up!”

When George did he saw what Menhaus was seeing: a plane. Far overhead, its lights blinking on and off. George fumbled out the flare gun and popped a flare into it. Then he took aim on the plane like he wanted to shoot it down.

The flare lit up the sea and sky.

Then there was nothing to do but wait and hope.

2

It was the next morning when they caught sight of the Coast Guard cutter. She had a high, ice-breaker bow and, thankfully, no sails. She looked modern in every respect. In every possible detail. George even saw a helicopter waiting on the flight deck like a wasp sunning itself. The cutter caught sight of them, circled and dropped two rubber boats into the sea.

"This is it, George," Menhaus said. "This is really fucking it."

"Yes," George said, overwhelmed by it all.

He felt a curious sense of disorientation, like he'd just woken from a dream. And that's what it had been, right? A dream? All a crazy, insane dream? Sure, it had to be, he got to thinking. For chrissake, George decided he did not believe in magnetic vortices and other dimensions, did not believe in fog-shrouded anti-worlds and sea monsters and aliens and ship's graveyards and Fog-Devils. No, he did not believe in any of that and he certainly didn't believe in the Dead Sea and Dimension X.

Only a crazy man believed shit like that.

But when he closed his eyes, heard those boats getting closer, he could see it all and he could see Gosling and Marx and Cook and Fabrini and, yes, Saks. And Cushing. Good old Cushing with that wonderful mind of his. And Elizabeth who never escaped that place. Sure, in the bright daylight, places like that could not be . . . but when you closed your eyes? You knew they existed.

Menhaus said, "I can't wait to see my bitchy, fat wife and my garage. Isn't that funny? I been thinking about my garage." He laughed, then stopped. "George . . . what the hell are we going to tell these people?"

George thought it over and the lie came easy. "We don't really know what happened. Got lost in the fog, hit something and went down. You and me were on a lifeboat, then we found this boat drifting. We jumped on board."

"They won't believe that . . . will they?"

George put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "Sure they will. Trust me, buddy, that's exactly what they want us to say. Nothing more, nothing that will look funny on their reports, just simple bullshit they can write down and will let them sleep at night."

The lead boat came in closer and the sailor in the rear cut the engine.

"Ahoy there!" an officer in khaki dress said from the front of the boat. "You in trouble here?"

Menhaus laughed. "Brother, don't you know it."

He helped Menhaus aboard, but George hesitated. "What the hell year is it?"

The officer and sailors looked at one another and then the officer told him.

George and Menhaus were smiling.

They'd done it, they'd actually done it.

Before he climbed onto the rubber boat, George picked up the teleporter and tossed it overboard. It floated for a moment and then went underwater, down into the depths below where it belonged.

"What was that?" the officer asked.

"Oh, that?" George laughed as he came aboard. "That's just my science project . .

. but I don’t care much for science anymore.”

Then he was in the boat and Menhaus couldn’t seem to stop grinning.